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Sohkastwawak: They Are Resilient
(First Nations Students and Achievement)

by

Noella R. Steinhauer

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education

In

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Dedication

To the memory of Dr. Lionel Kuniwa, a great scholar, elder and teacher, who inspired hope, love, and the validation of the inherent knowledge of our people.

To my parent's Walter and Jenny for their unconditional love and support.

To the students of First Nations communities everywhere for your resilience, determination, and hope.

Abstract

This study is an examination of the factors that impact the academic achievement of First Nations secondary students. Through interviews and discussions the perceptions of Aboriginal teens are recounted. The study shows that although students respond to issues of achievement they are bounded by a system which does not allow them to succeed. *Sohkastwawak* captures the spirit of resilience that the students demonstrate.

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To the participants who shared their stories with such sincerity and honesty. I feel honored to have spent time with you. Your resilience is an inspiration.

To my family and friends for your love and understanding. To the people of my community for your support and embrace.

To the students in the First Nations program, especially to the members of my cohort who shared the many joys and heartaches. Much love to you all.

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Chapter I

Sohkastwawak: They Are Resilient (First Nations Students and Achievement)

In the formal educational process, academic achievement is often viewed as the measure of a successful educational experience. At all levels (and especially at the secondary level) scholastic achievement becomes the measure for personal success for parents, for educators, and for students themselves. Unfortunately, within the present system it seems that high academic achievement is not possible for all students (McDermott, 1987). This fact rings particularly true for Aboriginal[1] students.

The relationship between academic achievement and the Aboriginal student has not been a symbiotic one. Although most Aboriginal parents and communities want their children to be prepared to attend mainstream institutions and to function in mainstream society the fact remains that Aboriginal students and graduates are under represented at all levels of formal education in Canada (Frideres, 1998). The irrelevance of provincially prescribed curriculum can be cited as only one of the factors affecting participation and achievement (Fisher, 1969 in Frideres, 1998). More and more Indian students in Alberta are remaining in school yet few are completing and receiving their diplomas (Ibid). This statistic has not changed significantly even though many Indian reserves have gained control of their own educational programming.[2]

According to Wood and Clay (1996) the achievement of Indian students may be

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[1] Throughout this paper I will use the terms Aboriginal, Indigenous, First Nations, Native, and Indian, interchangeably.

[2] Indian control of Indian Education is the result of demands of Indian bands to control the administration of their own educational programs. Schools administered on reserves are called band controlled schools.

adversely affected by cultural conflict and by a perceived lack of mobility in society. Still others say that student self-concept, self-esteem, and identity are factors which affect achievement (Mead 1934, Lewin 1936, Rodgers 1951, Ziller 1978, Goffman 1936, Erickson 1968, and Snygg& Combs 1949 in Parry 1982). Others (for instance Ogbu 1993) cite resistance as a key element in the underachievement of some minority students. My own feeling before I began this study was that Aboriginal students themselves must have perceptions and views that would validate or refute some of these previous findings. I believe that they might even have the solutions to the whole question of participation, achievement, and success within the educational system. It was this belief that directed me towards my research focus.

Research Focus

The focus of my research rested with my own personal concern regarding underachievement of Aboriginal students within the formal educational setting. Although I was guided by a number of questions these only served as guides and did not inhibit my open-ended discussions with young people. Generally, I wanted to learn about factors which affected achievement/success amongst Aboriginal students. Initially I wondered about how students would define achievement and or success in school. Then I began to wonder if they would be able to articulate any factors that might have an impact on that definition of achievement. Although I did not always specifically ask these questions they did remain at the back of my mind as I spoke with the young people in this study.

Significance of Study

This study will identify the perceived barriers to achievement as portrayed from a student perspective. Erickson (1987) believes that it is this student perspective that is absent in much research. He believes that only by going to the source can we get a clear understanding of both the questions and the answers. The study will be of significance to First Nation schools, to First Nations communities, and to public schools that seek to educate First Nations students because it will provide a reference point for curriculum implementation and change. It will allow them to appreciate the role that students can play in the educational process. As schools become more cognizant of the factors that effect achievement they will hopefully be able to plan program content and delivery more efficiently and effectively. As well this work will provide a model that can be used by provincial departments of education as they begin to establish collaborative relationships with First Nations. Through a relationship of mutual respect and understanding the problem of underachievement can begin to be eroded.

The study may help to articulate areas that are often ignored by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development[3] (DIAND) funding practices. It will allow the leadership of First Nations to identify and justify to the DIAND the areas requiring a focus thus facilitating the federal mandate of self-determination. Finally, this study will be of significance to universities in the areas of teacher education and educational

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[3] The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), is a federal government department that evolved out of the treaty making process; the treaties established throughout Canada between the Queen of England and Indian peoples of Canada. Unfortunately, this hold on the lives of Canadian Indigenous people's has been extremely one-sided and is seen by most Indian people as allying more with mainstream government than with the peoples to whom it was meant to serve.

administration. It will help to identify some of the areas that teachers and administrators require additional training in so that they can have a positive impact on student achievement.

Parenting too can be significantly affected by the results of this study. For it is not only the school and school system that students identify as factors impacting their achievement. The community and particularly the family unit must also listen and respond to the expressed needs of their young people. How they listen and how they respond will surely speak to the functionality of their relationship with the future leaders of their communities.

Situating Myself in the Research

Since I am a First Nations researcher in a First Nation community I feel that it is essential to situate myself in the research. By acknowledging the perspective from which I entered the research, the reader can appreciate some of the biases I possess. Living, growing up, and working in a First Nations community I am quite aware of the norms, rules of conduct, nuances, and communication patterns. Having this emic perspective allowed me to draw on a lifetime of experiences and patterns as a researcher. The emic perspective refers to a researcher's ability to experience and see things from a insider's point of view. My family life, pre-formal and formal educational experiences have been the most significant factors in shaping my perceptions of the world. It is those unique perceptions that I wish to share.

Unlike the mainstream notion that all Indian families are either single parent or

dysfunctional, I was privileged to be raised by two loving parents. My parents nurtured and continue to support all my aspirations to the present day. Although both of them attended residential schools they never consciously allowed any residual affects to mar our upbringing. They allowed my four younger siblings and I to become decision makers at a young age. I remember my parents asking for our opinions in various decisions. They once brought home a new van for us to approve of before they closed the deal. As we examined every nook and cranny they reminded us that we would all have to make certain sacrifices if we bought it. Once we considered all the factors and supported the purchase the deal was closed. Life was great and not necessarily always perfect. Our parents also allowed us to make mistakes so that we could learn from them and never once did they say "I told you so." In my childhood naivety I imagined that everyone shared the same secure and supportive environment I had grown up in. When I began school I realized that things would be quite different.

My first years of school were spent on the reserve. I could see the school from my house and I only had to walk about 500 meters down the road to get there. Once I got to school I realized that school was much different from home. Although all the children at school were culturally homogenous, lifestyles were different. Some lived with grandparents, some with aunts and uncles, and some even lived with people other than relatives. We all spoke English sprinkled with Cree since there were many words we did not know in English. As the school year wore on I also realized that decision making patterns were different and that the teacher made all the decisions. I gradually

grew to accept these patterns till I no longer found them to be different. Although I spent almost all my time on the reserve I knew that there were differences between cultures and I was curious to learn about and meet new people. It was this curiosity and a good friend's public school stories that piqued my interest in attending public school in a nearby town.

By the time I reached the end of grade two I convinced my parents to allow me to attend the public school in town. Excited to ride the big yellow bus and curious to meet new people, I began my first day in public school. My expectations were deflated within the first couple of days. I was placed in a class that only had Indian students and at recess time no one would play with us. Instead when I tried to talk to them they would walk away or simply ignore me. After repeated attempts to make friends I felt that there might be something wrong with me. When I got home I asked my mother what was going on and she explained to me that that was the way things were and it was not my fault. I realized sometime later that I was in a special education class.

After a few days I was placed in a regular classroom with non-Native students and there were only three other Indian children. I thought that things might change but they did not. All four of us were placed in a row with our backs to the window. The teacher insured that we were singled out because she would perform weekly head checks on us for lice. Although she never found any lice, she maintained the ritual for the entire year. Racial differences were highlighted even more when recess began and the white children played a game of tag with "Indian germs." Of course the game did not include

Indian children because we were just 'too dirty' to deserve inclusion. I also soon realized that teachers would rather not deal with the issue of racism because they would ignore our complaints and by not dealing with it they were (perhaps inadvertently) supporting it. I realized that I was very different and that it was not good. I also realized that I was judged only on my appearance rather than the person I was. I realized that the only friends that I could have were other Indian children and the occasional poor white child. By year end I had convinced my mother to cut the long hair that I had always worn in braids, just so I could avoid the scrutiny of teachers and persecution from students.

By the time I finished grade four and grade five in the public school I had learned that I had to behave a certain way. I learned how to make myself invisible. I learned that if I avoided situations that required interaction with other students I would avoid the hurt of racist slurs and actions. As a result, like many other Indian kids I did not join any clubs or organizations. Instead I would hang out with the other Indian kids in places on the playground or in the school where no one else was.

During the summer I was to enter grade six we moved to a new house on the edge of the reserve. Since the bus ride into town would be more than one hour long we collectively decided that we would attend another public school in a nearby farming community. The school was a welcomed change. I no longer had to contend with the daily bouts of overt racism from students. I no longer had to be as invisible because teachers were actually acknowledging my existence. The new school was small in

comparison to the other school and the fact that all the students lived on farms made it different from the first school. Since the farm children rode buses to school and had to rely on limited family incomes they shared similar socio-economic characteristics with us.

I attended the small school from grade six through twelve. Although there were rarely any overt racist actions there was definitely covert racism. In junior high there would be occasional comments from teachers and students that had racial overtones. It was in this period of time that I became aware of the racist intent when students and teachers would say "you people" when referring to Indian people. I knew that the term "you people" meant that we would never be accepted as equals but we would be tolerated and even befriended. Still, we would never be invited to birthday parties or other community events. By the time I finished junior high, there was only a handful of Indian children in school. When I entered highschool there were only three Indian students in the entire high school population. Since I had attended the school for a number of years I had a few close non-Indian friends. Yet once we completed highschool we rarely contacted each other, another attestation to the idea that our friendship was only permissible in the context of school.

After completing highschool I attended a small local Native operated college. It was a warm and embracing experience to be among other Indian students in a formal educational setting. I had long forgotten the comfort of being at school where race was not a factor. Feeling confident and recharged I decided to transfer to the University of

Alberta. I knew that there would be very few Indian people there but I did not know that I would feel so great a culture shock. Once I overcame the initial shock of registration and adjustment to city life I had to begin attending classes. Since I was deeply interested in learning more about Indian people, I enrolled in various history and anthropology classes. In one particular class on an area of Native Canadian history, I wanted to make myself invisible like I had in elementary school. During one of the first classes the professor needed to verify a statement and looked to me for verification. Since I did not have any background in textbook Native Canadian history I could not verify or even respond to the statement. At that moment I felt like an idiot; I did not know anything about my own people's history. As a result I always made sure that I sat at the very back of the class and of course I would never ask a question or clarify a statement even if I disagreed with it. I fell into my old pattern of making myself invisible and managed to complete my undergraduate education that way.

When I began teaching, I was determined to cram all the book knowledge that I could into the brains of my students. I soon realized that many of my students lived in conditions that were not necessarily conducive to the formal educational process. I was heartbroken when I found out that students came to school hungry or had only a few hours sleep because there had been a party at their house. It pained me to see children suffering from abuse and neglect. My initial teaching experience made me realize that the harsh realities that many of the students faced far outweighed the desire to excel in school. I also realized that curriculum was not always relevant to the lives of my

students. It just was not important for a student to learn about the merits of central planning in Russia when he might be worried about something at home. More importantly concepts were often foreign to the daily context of my students' lives. As a result I have begun to teach my students from our shared perspective in order to maintain our cultural integrity.

Leading to My Bias

Knowing and understanding all the previous information obviously places me in a very different position in my research compared to an outsider or someone from another culture who might do research in a First Nations school. Obviously I enter the picture at a very different place than any other researcher. My allegiance to the students is inherent and I want for them the best possible education because I want them to achieve their dreams. I realize the absolute importance of honesty and respect because without those I would never get to the root of the issues. So that throughout the research I acknowledge that I have a bias and an allegiance and maybe the difference is that I want to be clear and open about my bias.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study is delimited to a selected group of secondary students on an Indian reserve in Alberta. They are students who have dropped out of school or who demonstrated inconsistencies in achievement over a period of three years. A further delimitation of this study is that the students in this study had at one time dropped out of school. It was from their experiences that they based their comments. I do not mean to

say that all Indian students in all communities would experience the same dilemmas or even the same drop out rates that the students in this study experienced. I do believe however, that the students who expressed the views for me might aptly represent a number of similar students in that same community. The study will be limited by the use of a phenomelogical framework utilizing ethnographic tools. Initially I was not confident with my interview skills but after my first interview I became more confident and my skills continued to improve. As a participant observer I was somewhat limited by the fact that many of the events and gatherings I attended were common to me, as a result I had to make the familiar become strange (Spindler, 1988).

Acknowledging that I had my own biases I realized that it was essential for me to examine other studies. Therefore, chapter two will examine written work in relation to the various aspects of student achievement.

Chapter II

A Review of the Literature

What is achievement? Why do students underachieve? How is self-concept related to achievement and identity? Why do students dropout? What is the role of community and parents in fostering achievement? Achievement in any form is a measure of success. For many Indian students the level of academic achievement remains dismally low and this could be attributed to various factors. The Assembly of First Nations report (1998) addressed the issue of quality and stated; "First Nations students have a right to education programs and services of the highest quality which incorporate culturally relevant content and academic skills"(Charleston, 1988 in Kirkness, 1992). It is recognized that changes must take place to improve attendance, retention, motivation, and attitudes toward school (MacIvor, 1996), simply because these factors affect achievement and its measurable outcome-promotion and graduation. "Only 25 percent of the on-reserve population earn high school diplomas (or equivalent), while among other Canadians, over 50 per cent of the population attain similar levels of education"(p.73). In light of these factors the primary aim of this chapter was to review some of the literature relevant to First Nations and academic achievement.

Achievement

Achievement as defined in Webster's Universal College Dictionary (1997) is, "something accomplished, as through great effort, skill, perseverence, or courage"(P.7). This accomplishment is the essential element of the educational system in both Canada and the United States. Achievement in education becomes academic achievement and is

measured through the utilization of various standardized tests and student evaluations. In North American society concern with student academic achievement has grown because it is a measure of success for the particular school and for society in general.

Recently, the idea of authentic achievement and related topics were discussed by Newmann and Associates (1996). In this context authentic academic achievement can be defined "through three criteria critical to significant intellectual accomplishment: construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and the value of achievement beyond school" (Wehlage, Newmann and Secada, 1996 p.24). Similarly, for Indian people the goals of primary and secondary education, "should empower Indian students to be (1) capable of lifelong learning, (2) able to lead their individual lives in directions they desire, and (3) able to function as literate and politically active citizens" (Garcia and Ahler 1992 p.16). To become politically literate and active students would have ability to become aware of their roles in relation to the various levels of government and would also have the ability to be self directed, independent and able to fulfill goals. "As an educational aim or outcome, lifelong learning refers to the students' ability to learn a vocation or pursue further education at colleges, universities, or technical-vocational institutes for economic gain or personal pleasure"(Garcia, and Ahler, 1992 p.16). By not successfully completing their formal school education these studies suggest Indian students are jeopardizing their chances for economic gain and certainly for personal fulfillment.

Over the past few decades there has been a demand for greater control of Indian education by Indian people. Largely driven by the goal that Indian parents want their children to learn "those things needed for success in both the white and the Native

worlds"(Bradley, 1980 in Hampton, 1996 p.7). In published findings from a survey on Indian Control of Indian Education since 1973, some of the respondents "felt that students should be equipped to take their places both in the local community and the larger society" (Kirkness, 1992 p. 55). It is clear that parents want their children to achieve well academically, yet so many Indian children do not do well academically and continue to drop out from school (Mackay and Myles, 1989).

Underachievement

To underachieve is "to perform below the potential indicated by tests of one's mental ability or aptitude (Webster's, 1997). The problem of underachievement is one that can be observed from both a macro and micro level. Underachievement of minority populations has become an issue of critical concern and has been examined by many (Coleman et al. 1966; Carter 1970; U.S Congress 1976; Jencks et al. 1972; Carter and Segura 1979; Ogbu 1974, 1978, 1987; Rueda 1983, 1987; Saurez-Orozco 1987, Erickson 1984; and Trueba 1987a, 1987b, 1988). At the macro level the low academic achievement can be attributed to those students who belong to minority groups, are immigrants, are from non-English speaking families, or who have low socio-economic status (Levin, 1986 in Levin, 1990). Levin refers to these students as educationally disadvantaged, because they "begin their schooling with lower standardized achievement than their nondisadvantaged peers" (Levin, 1990 p.3). Other studies have also concluded that socioeconomic factors play a significant role in academic achievement. High-academic achievers tend to come from high income families and low achievers tend to come from low income families (Miller, 1995). Further, the disadvantaged begin school

behind their peers and the gap widens throughout the school experience therefore, it is imperative that this minority-majority difference be addressed (Ibid). It is essential that reforms to the education system take place as this disadvantaged population will eventually become a large uneducated, underclass of adults who will be unable to make viable contributions to industry and the economy, ultimately causing a strain on public programs (Levin, 1990, Miller, 1995).

At the micro level underachievement can be viewed along racial and ethnic lines. In an American National Education Longitudinal Study (1988), selected data from the Race/Ethnicity section demonstrated that Black, Hispanic, and Native American students tended to score in the lower percentiles on standardized tests (Miller, 1995). In fact they "were all underrepresented in the highest quartile and over represented in the bottom quartile. This pattern was most acute for Native Americans-only 13 percent were in the top quartile and 37 percent were in the bottom quartile" (p.71). Although the cultural relevance and actual viability of standardized tests must always be questioned, certainly these finding must have some significance. Given the fact that Indian students do demonstrate low levels of achievement lends itself to the assumption that there are definite problems requiring further examination.

Self-Concept

Studies on self concept and its relationship to under achievement often refer to the work of Mead (1934), Lewin (1936), Rodgers (1951), Ziller (1973), Goffman (1936), Erickson (1968), and Snygg and Combs (1949) in Parry 1982). These "self-concept theorists all accept a view of the developing self-concept as being dependent on

the individual's perception of his total appraisal of how significant others view him." (Parry, 1982 p.12) The idea of self-concept is central to one's being. According to Coopersmith (1967):

> Self concepts are symbols that blend together the enormous number of varied perceptions; memories and prior experiences that are salient in the personal life of the individual. This concept of one's self... is formed by the individual, and represents an organization of separate experiences into some pattern that provides meaning and order in his inner world. (in Young and Bagley, 1983 p.52)

Self-concept is related to self-esteem because self-concept is the image a person has of himself and self-esteem is his evaluation of that image (Young and Bagley, 1983). In addition to self-esteem in the idea of self-concept is the concept of identity. "Identity has both cognitive (knowledge) and affective (evaluation) aspects, and these two aspects are related to self-concept and self-esteem respectively" (p.55). Further, cognitive identity consists of both cultural and personal identity which ethnic minorities posses (Ibid). Often it is problematic for members of ethnic minorities to maintain a balance between personal and cultural identity (Ibid). Identity, self-esteem, and self-concept play critical roles in achievement especially with minorities. Members of minorities often experience cultural and psychological isolation that prevents them from gaining "the experience, knowledge, and skills required for active participation in school activities that are the basis for cognitive development and academic success"(Trueba, 1988 p.202). Following from this belief depending upon the minority one identifies with, identification could be detrimental to achievement.

Minority Types

According to Ogbu (1978, 1993) there are three types of minorities; autonomous minorities, voluntary or immigrant minorities, and castelike or involuntary minorities. "Autonomous minorities tend to be numerically smaller than-but not totally subordinated economically or politically to-the dominant group"(Ogbu, 1978 p.22). Although they may face prejudice and discrimination they do not experience the same learning problems as other minorities "because they usually have a cultural frame of reference that demonstrates and encourages school success"(Ogbu 1993, p. 92). In the United States autonomous minorities are usually represented by Jewish people and by people who follow the Mormon teachings.

Voluntary minorities as described by Ogbu (1993) are those groups who have voluntarily moved to the United States with the belief that there would be greater economic opportunities for them there. Although they may often fall victim to prejudice and discrimination they accept it as the price of achieving their goals. Even though they may experience "difficulties due to language and cultural differences, they do not experience lingering disproportionate school failure"(p.92). Chinese and Japanese people in the United States are examples of successful voluntary minorities, and in fact have often been stereotyped as model minorities (Lee, 1996).

Castelike or involuntary minorities are those groups who have become minorities because they were brought to the United States as slaves, were conquered in war, or were colonized (Ibid). As a result they were "relegated to menial positions and denied true assimilation into mainstream society. American Indians, Black Americans, and

Native Hawaiians are examples"(p.92). It is this group of minorities that have the most problems with social adjustment and achievement. They encounter a myriad of culture and language differences that they have more difficulty than voluntary minorities in overcoming "due to the oppositional nature of their cultural frame of reference"(p.101). Involuntary minorities tend to be less prepared by their families to compete for desirable positions and jobs in society and feel that societal barriers have confined them to the lowest jobs (Ogbu 1978). They also tend to feel that school learning will eliminate their identity and that academic success is a way of "acting white" (Ogbu 1993). Members of involuntary minorities also learn to become cynical and because they believe that they will be confined to lower jobs therefore, see no need to follow practices that are conducive to academic achievement (Ibid). Some minority writers and researchers question Ogbu's theories (Trueba 1987 , Wilson, 1991) yet his beliefs must be acknowledged as possible factors in Indian student achievement.

In an effort to test and gain a clearer perspective of Ogbu's theory in relation to American Indians, Wood and Clay (1996) studied 352 American Indian and over 1000 Anglo, high school students' in Oklahoma. They felt that "a more accurate picture of the educational experience of Indian students must take into account structural and subsequently social psychological dynamics that influence students' motivation to achieve in school" (Wood & Clay, 1996 p.42) They found that cultural conflict and perceived barriers were in fact detrimental to achievement. Of paramount importance in this study was the impact on achievement resulting from the Indian student's feelings of isolation, alienation, and discrimination in the educational setting. This study further

justified the necessity to examine Indian student achievement and the possible outcome of dropping out of school.

Indian Children and Dropout Rates

Much of the research relating to Indian student achievement focuses on drop-out rates. These studies (Coleman 1966, Coombs et al., 1958 in Ogbu 1978) examine the academic achievement of American Indian students in the United States. They show that large gaps between Indian and white children exist. Both studies found that Indian students would start behind other children and fall further and further behind through the grades (Ogbu 1978). In a similar study amongst American and Canadian Indian students Bisser (1984) in his Flower of Two Soils Project found that Indian children began school with the same academic competence and success as their mainstream counterparts, and that they maintained this equal academic status until the fourth grade (or age 9). His study maintains that between grades 4 and 7 there is a dramatic drop in academic achievement for Indian students.

By the eighth grade (age 13) the dropout rate for Indian students has become a serious issue. Even those Indian students who did remain in school had in essence 'dropped out' because they no longer took part in activities or contributed significantly to the classroom culture.

The problems Indian children experience with mastering basic skills in reading and mathematics prevent them from establishing the foundation necessary "for learning other skills and for effective functioning."(James, Chavez, Beauvais, Edwards, & Oetting, 1995 p.181) As the gap in achievement widens through the grades it is

compounded by language and culture problems, as a result Indian children dropout. In fact one study (Bowker, 1992 in James, et, al; 1995) found that the rate of Native American children dropping out of school before high school graduation was between 36 to 50 percent. This percentage compares to rates of 15 to 17 percent for white students and 22 to 24 percent for African American students.

In Canada a 1989 (Mackay and Myles) study called *Native Student Dropouts* in Ontario Schools, identified factors leading to dropout. The study focused on Native students in provincial schools. The primary factor leading to their eventual dropping out from school was previous academic failure. Their academic failures consisted of failing tests, failing grades in courses, falling grade levels behind, and grade retention. Culture and language were also identified as factors leading to dropout. As a result students became disinterested and dissatisfied with school, then started to miss or skip school eventually dropping out (Mackay and Myles, 1989, 1996). The study concluded that there were a number of factors leading to dropout and these factors fell under the responsibility of various agencies from Indian and Northern Affairs to the parents, and even the student who had dropped out (Mackay and Myles, 1989). It was also pointed out that statistics are not reliable and inaccurate generalizations about dropout rates can be made (Ibid). "For example, aggregated statistics for Ontario suggest that in the 1980's between one-third and just over half of registered Indian students who entered Grade 9 in provincial secondary schools would graduate three years later"(p.160). This type of generalization ignores the variations in school retention and graduation rates between Indian communities and within the contexts they receive that education

throughout the province (Ibid). Although the study did provide some valuable insights it failed to recognize the fact the Indian students in provincial schools often feel isolated from school, from white students, and from their teachers (Wilson, 1991). Wilson found that Indian students often fall victim to racial slurs from white students, to teacher ambivalence, and to lack of adequate counseling. As a result of isolation from the system students "absent themselves from classes and ultimately from the school" (p.378). Although statistics and studies of dropout rates for reserve children are difficult to find, if they exist at all, the fact remains that high numbers of Indian children do drop out of school and fail to achieve. Therefore, student, school, community, and parental factors must be examined as facets of student achievement.

The Indian Student

The Indian student by virtue of the fact that he is a member of a unique minority culture will have different views about achievement, interaction, and learning style. In a comparative study (Dabul, Bernal, and Knight, 1995) between Mexican American and Anglo-American adolescents allocentric and idiocentric self-descriptors were examined to establish a relationship with academic achievement. Idiocentric views of one's self is characterized by "an emphasis on personal freedom, expression, and independence," (Markus & Kitayama, 1991 and Miller, 1988, in Dabul, Bernal, and Knight, 1995 p.622). Alternately, one with "an allocentric view of the self emphasizes the importance of social relationships and the maintenance of interdependence" (DeVos, 1985 and Miller, 1988 in Dabul et.el. p.622). The study found that adolescents who possessed an idiocentric view "had higher academic competency and grade point averages than those

valuing allocentrism" suggesting "that the adoption of values associated with individualistic cultures may be most consistent with academic success in the United States" (p.629). It further asserted that those who valued allocentrism seemed to have a negative relationship with academic success. Indian students tend to identify in collective forms and will not risk achievement beyond the group for fear of "violating group solidarity" (Steinhauer, 1995 p.8). Their values also prevent them from over achieving because they do not want to become social outcasts within their peer group (Steinhauer, 1997). Within this cultural framework Indian children also share common patterns of communication.

Edward T. Hall (1989) wrote about low-context and high-context cultures. Low-context cultures are those who rely on verbal skills to relay their message, while high-context cultures rely less on verbal codes and more on "context or on existing, non-verbal information" (Taylor 1996 p.233). Additionally, "each culture has its own characteristic manner of locomotion, sitting, standing, reclining, and gesturing" (Hall 1989 p.75).

The First Nation Student on the Reserve

Although recognition of cultural differences is essential, the daily lives of many Indian students living on reserves is often filled with turmoil and harsh realities. (Steinhauer, 1997) Their lives are often adversely affected by issues beyond the classroom especially issues of "poverty, language development, values, and racism."(p.251) Since most reserve communities are separate autonomous units, the interdependence and relationship between all that occurs within is unavoidable.

Community issues such as poverty impact the classroom because students do not attend school when cheques are released hence affecting achievement and learning (Ibid). It was Boloz and Varrati (1983) who concluded that those Indian children who attended school regularly and live in a stable environment demonstrate higher levels of achievement than those who do not.

Language development is impeded because most students learn English from second language learners and as a result make the same errors in writing and speaking. Steinhauer (1997) believes that one factor currently affecting the English language development of First Nations students is that they are taught English by parents and family for whom English is a second language and as a result make the same errors in writing and speaking as do their parents. Although, all of these individual factors faced by First Nation student might seem somewhat overwhelming, the role of the community in the student's life is of equal or greater impact.

School and Community Roles

Given the insular nature of Indian reserves, it is essential that all aspects of the community (the individual, the school, parents and community) recognize their role in effecting student achievement. School administration has a responsibility to preservice teachers for ethnoculturally diverse populations (Deering and Stanutz, 1995; Goddard, 1996). In order for students to achieve it is essential that schools remain committed to providing opportunities for teachers to establish and enhance their skills so that they can effectively work with First Nations children. Wilson (1998) believes that it is the responsibility of every teacher training program to provide culturally responsive training

for their student teachers. Erickson (1993) demonstrates that success can be achieved only through culturally responsive pedagogy. Erickson's approach is a school-based method which is part of the work necessary to transform general society.

"Individual growth, community success, and cultural survival intertwine. Cultural assaults and community breakdowns hinder individual achievement."(James et.el. 1995, p.200) The community has the responsibility to provide children with the network and support necessary for achievement. Alternately, the individual's attainment and health will "enhearten communities and culture."(p.200) Although the significance of the community in embracing First Nation students is evident, unfortunately some communities have reached a crucial state of dysfunction and have fallen prey to "Plastic Indians and Circuit Elders" (Wilson, 1995). These superficial Indians who tout their Indianess are often sexual abusers or wife batterers, who "have no real understanding of" culture. (p.37) Still they are the voice students often hear even though "their preaching repels many young people who are looking for genuine, lived common knowledge."(p.37) As a result students learn to become cynical and skeptical of those providing advice. Therefore, it is essential for communities to examine their roles and to speak and lead with honesty integrity because leaders become role models - either for better or worse.

In spite of the significant roles of school and community the greatest role in achievement still might remain with parents. Indian parents and expectations of their children must be clear since expectations have been found to have a direct impact on achievement (Ridone 1988, Wall and Madak 1991). Further parents who provide a

stable home environment have children who achieve better (Boloz and Varrati, 1983). Interestingly, a Canadian study concluded that children attending a community school had slightly higher self-concepts than those attending off-reserve schools (Wall and Madak, 1991). Finally, "by, developing strategies to garner a positive working relationship between teachers and parents, they will be helping Indian students succeed in any endeavor"(Littlebear, 1994 p.106). It is evident that parents have a considerable role in providing clear expectations and a stable environment, in order to insure better student achievement.

Summary

The literature has indeed helped to define achievement and its significance in relation to the minority student. It has also established that "We can change school systems to make them fit better with tribal cultures and offer instruction in tribal languages to better meet Indian students' identities and needs. This has, in fact, been done in places and does seem to promote staying in school and academic achievement"(James et.al. 1995 p.199). Research has established the need for further study in this area, especially from the perspective of the Indian student. In their 1996 study, Wood and Clay concluded that "there is a pressing need for research that takes into account historical background, tribal variation, and particularly social structural factors-perceived or otherwise-that affect the schooling of Indian youth"(p.58). These factors are indicative of the fact that we must work toward the provision of pedagogy that is culturally, socially, and politically appropriate. Before we can begin to undertake that task it is of paramount importance to first identify factors that could impact

achievement.

Chapter III

The Methodology

Is one kind of research more credible than another? What methodology would allow the voice of participants to ring through? Which presentation would be most effective? Like most researchers I grappled with these and the numerous questions that surrounded doing research. It is the inevitable peril of research. As I struggled to select a paradigm I looked into the future and pondered what it was that I hoped to achieve in my final report. Although both qualitative and quantitative paradigms have their merits, quantitative research is sometimes viewed as the more credible paradigm simply because data are numerical thus more readily identifiable (and therefore considered more reliable and valid). Alternately, qualitative research data has "been termed 'soft', that is, rich in description of people, place and conversations, and not easily handled by statistical procedures" (Bogdan & Biklen 1998 p.2). Yet the qualitative paradigm would allow me as a researcher to examine complex topics in their context. Further, it would allow me to understand behavior from the "subjects own frame of reference" (Ibid).

My attraction to the qualitative paradigm was and is based on five characteristics identified by Bogdan & Biklen (1998).

1. *Naturalistic*. Qualitative research has actual settings as the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument.
2. *Descriptive Data*. The data collected take the form of words or pictures rather than numbers.
3. *Concern with Process*. Qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products.
4. *Inductive*. Qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively.
5. *Meaning*. Researchers who use this approach are interested in how

different people make sense of their lives. (p.4)

Although, qualitative studies (Rampual, Singh, & Didyk, 1984 and Wood & Clay, 1996) have found that cultural discontinuity and racism are detrimental to the achievement of Indian children, they have not echoed the student's voice. Therefore, I felt that the utilization of the qualitative paradigm was the most appropriate for my study.

The Phenomenological Framework

Like most researchers who work within the qualitative paradigm my work was conducted within a phenomenological framework. This framework allowed me "to capture the reality of the subjects" (Lancy, 1993) p.9. Although I was guided by prudence in confining myself to a particular methodology, the basic procedures of phenomenology as described by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) guided my study. These procedures were supplemented by the use of ethnographic tools described by Spradley (1979), ethnographic interview and participant observation.

"Phenomenology is the study of the world as it appears to individuals when they place themselves in a state of consciousness that reflects an effort to be free of everyday biases and beliefs" (Gall, Borg, and Gall 1996) p.600. In the Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) text, four procedures for planning and conducting phenomenological investigation are identified. The first is to "identify a topic of personal and social significance"(Ibid p.601). As a teacher and a member of a First Nations community the issue of student achievement is of both personal and social importance. Primarily because I plan to continue to live in a First Nations community secondly, the benefits of increased student

achievement will be beneficial not only to the students I teach but to the community at large.

Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) also recommend selecting appropriate participants. Participants "who have experienced the phenomenon being studied and share the researcher's interest in understanding its nature and meaning (Ibid p.601). In this vein I selected First Nations students between the ages of 16-21 who had left or dropped out of school and then later returned. I chose students who returned to school only because it provided a commonality among the students.

Each of the participants were interviewed "in order to obtain a comprehensive description of their experience of the phenomenon being studied"(Ibid p.602). The interview process relied heavily on the ethnographic interview as described by Spradley (1979). Because the participants live in a First Nations community they are part of a distinct culture and therefore certain protocols had to be observed in the solicitation of interviews.

Participant observation is another tool which allowed me to enter various social situations in the community "with two purposes: (1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and (2) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation. (Spradley, 1980 p.54). As a participant observer I attended community feasts, round dances, pow-wows, and various community functions. In this role I was aware of cultural norms so I was able to blend in and appear to be just another First Nation person participating in the function. This emic perspective is one that I have earned and value. It allowed me to move through the community not only as participant observer but as a

member of a similar First Nation community.

The Participants

The participants are members of a selected reserve community in Alberta. Each of them have lived on reserve for most of their lives and have attended the reserve school at the secondary level. Each of the students previously attended non-Native or off reserve schools. Participants ranged in age from 16-21 years, they are students who have dropped out of school previously or experienced problems in completing school then returned to school on their own accord. This group also included students who had recently graduated. This age group was chosen because I felt that they would be mature enough to articulate their experiences and young enough to recount recent experiences with school. I also felt that they would open and provide a wide range of experiences from which to draw . Most of all they were students who had experienced success in having returned to school. The six students who participated in this study were selected on recommendation from school staff.

Initially, I wanted a cross section of students, equal gender representation, two from single parent homes, two from two parent homes, and two that were living independently. Immediately, I found this criteria difficult to fulfill as I soon realized that fewer males than females returned to school after they had left or dropped out. Once I had located students, I then found it difficult to locate students who were from two parent homes or living independently. Instead I found that all of the students were from one parent homes or homes in which the marriage had broken down. In the end I did manage to have a gender balance of participants and each of them came from one parent

households. This, in itself was a significant finding.

Data Collection

Before beginning data collection I contacted the Director of Education for Willow First Nation.[4] The Director then directed me to the Chief and Council for approval. I then submitted a letter to Chief and Council seeking their approval of my proposal to gather data on the Willow First Nation Reserve. Chief and Council were very supportive and after a few days provided me with a letter approving my research. With the approval of Chief and Council, I met with the principal of Willow First Nation School. She welcomed me and allowed me to select students for my study, I relied heavily on recommendations from school staff in my selection.

Once the participants were identified I met with them individually to discuss their participation in the study. I also provided those under legal age with forms to be signed by their parents. Each student was anxious to participate in a formal interview. The data collection consisted of open-ended one-on-one interviews. Interviews were approximately two hours long at each sitting. Since I am a member of a nearby Aboriginal community the establishment of rapport was relatively easy. Still I followed the principles of the ethnographic interview method while establishing rapport as outlined by Spradley (1979).

Interviews were audio taped. Before the first interview began each informant was made aware of his/her right to participate and/or to withdraw at anytime. Each of the audio taped interviews was then transcribed verbatim. Participants were also made

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[4] Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the individuals and places in this study.

aware that the audio tapes would be available to my supervisor only and to myself and would be destroyed upon the completion of the study. They were made aware of the fact that their identities would be protected. To insure the anonymity of each participant, pseudonymous for each participant were created. I must point out that participants in the study did not necessarily want to conceal their identity, I have however, for the writing of this thesis, made every effort to mask identities of places and individuals.

To supplement my data collection I utilized participant observation. Through participant observation I was able to attend community feasts, round dances, pow-wows, and various community functions and observe community norms. As a First Nation's person I was quite aware of the protocols necessary so my presence was not noticeable nor intrusive, I was merely a person participating in the function

The Interviews

The interviews consisted of questions that would allow me to identify views of achievement and what factors caused students to dropout of or leave school. These interviews were conducted over a six month period. This period allowed me ample time to transcribe interviews so that any question or issues requiring clarification could be addressed. The questions that I asked were of the following nature, that is to say, I kept these questions in mind. However I used a conversational format so that I could draw upon what individuals said in order to move the discussion forward. For the most part, there was no need to ask specific questions. Rather the unasked questions were already answered in the discussions. However, I kept these questions in mind:

1. *Tell me about you school experience.*

2. *What does achievement mean to you?*
3. *How do you feel as a student in this school?*
4. *Why do you think you dropped out of school?*
5. *How well do you get along will with others?*
6. *What role do you think you play in the community?*

The school records of each student were also examined. In these records I found mainly grades, attendance records, and a few letters. Access to these records was provided by the school administration.

Data Analysis

After each interview I recorded field notes that included a description of the atmosphere and interview environment. These notes included any strong ideas or opinions that may have been expressed by the informant. I also utilized these notes to guide my next interview. My analysis component also relied on what Guba and Lincoln (in Owen 1982) have called an 'audit trail' This included the log that I began in early stages of my research but it also included:

1. *Raw notes from interviews and observations*
2. *Edited summary notes of interviews and observations*
3. *Records of meetings about the research*
4. *All documents used as data sources*
5. *Guidelines and "rules" used for content analysis of documents*
6. *Decision rules by which data were categorized*
7. *Interview guidelines, and*
8. *Completed documents that may have been commissioned as part of the study* (Owens 1982) p.13

Once the data collection process was completed and the notes transcribed, I read the

notes over and tried to find similar themes. These themes were then coded so that I could begin to extract the statements that expressed the meaning the participants wanted to convey. Each theme was then listed on a large unlined piece of chart paper and taped to the wall. I assigned each participant a color and pseudonym, then photocopied the interviews in that color. The colors were helpful in quickly identifying the individual. I then read through each of the interviews several times and each time I cut out the data clusters from the interview to tape under the appropriate theme. The themes were listed horizontally across the top and the pseudonyms were listed vertically on the left side of the sheet.

Ethical Considerations

Anonymity is a big issue because each of the students is a member of a small community where almost everyone knows everyone else. Therefore, to protect their identity a vignette for each of them was created. (The vignette reflects their gender with the similar theme of a student who had previously left or dropped out of school as a the similar thread.) The vignettes are composed of composite information of the students interviewed while also using statistical data from a number of students from adjoining communities. These vignettes are meant simply to provide a sense of who First Nations students are to readers unfamiliar with First Nations communities and cultures.

Teacher as researcher role is another serious ethical consideration. Since I am a teacher in a small community I thought that the participants might feel that they must respond in a certain way. To deal with the issue I told each of the participants that I was interviewing them as researcher and not as a teacher. I felt that this was quite effective

because each participant was extremely honest, sincere, and open.

The Setting

Having lived in a reserve community setting all of my life I felt it necessary to provide a description of the community. Community, in my view, is the essence of First Nations existence. Reserve settings have been mired by the effects of colonization, confining people to reserves which destroyed the nomadic lifestyle of the pre-colonial era and institutionalizing them in residential schools. Still, reserve communities in Canada today largely remain insular, thus allowing the perpetuation of values, beliefs, and customs unique to First Nations. Although insular, reserves are not islands unto themselves but have been impacted by the cultural hegemony of society. The clothes, cars, television, music, drugs and alcohol of mainstream society can be found even in the most remote communities. Reserves differ across the country according to language and culture, proximity to urban centres, economic development, and education. Therefore, I find it necessary to provide a description of the community setting of this study.

Willow First Nation

Willow First Nation is a Cree community with approximately 2500 residents living in a twenty by ten kilometer area. Approximately 50 percent of the land is usable and the remainder is covered by marshes, sloughs, and lakes. Some of the usable land is utilized for mixed farming and private residences. It is located within a comfortable three hour drive from a fairly large urban centre.

Willow is surrounded by three small towns within a twenty five minute drive in each direction. Relationships with these towns is not founded on respect instead it is

one of mutual dependence. This is especially true of the larger town of 6500, with all the services and amenities available. Although, the people of Willow spend almost all of their income in this town the service provided is carried out with just basic tolerance rather than genuine respect. In a town serving the number of Indian people it does, (it serves at least three other reserves) I can only visibly count two Indian people working in any of the businesses. The other towns are smaller, have fewer services and visibly have no Native people working in them.

Within Willow itself a large concentration of people reside a two by two kilometer area. This area is the center of community activity, housing the school, daycare centre, stores, community hall, and the multiplex. The multiplex is the hub of the reserve, and includes an ice arena, various Band department offices, restaurants, and of course the offices of Chief and council. There is a central meeting area at the multiplex where one can spend an entire day visiting and drinking coffee. Every Friday a trader's market is held in this central area where people can buy and sell home made products or new and used goods. People can buy anything from homemade bread to t-shirts. Still the most important activity that takes place is the visiting between people young and old. School children and Elders fill the area during the lunch hour.

Willow is governed by a Chief and council who are elected by the people for a three year term. Chief and council receive salaries and are the recognized leadership of the community and manage the affairs of the community. They meet officially two days a week as a council and during this time people can meet with them if they have a concern. Otherwise members can meet with the Chief or individual councillors but any

major decisions must be brought to the entire council so that it can be discussed and decided upon by the majority. Chief and council have the responsibility of overseeing all band matters from creating policy, managing funds, to resolving disputes.

Since Chief and council are considered the authority in all matters, they are relied upon to insure economic activity grows and continues. Unfortunately, the level of growth in the economic activity in Willow is dismally low, unemployment rates and welfare roles are high. There is seasonal labor available in construction, farming, and other labor intensive fields. Although there is a large and skilled labor force there are too few jobs to go around. Many residents of Willow realize that the opportunity to receive a good job is limited and as a direct result many have returned to pursue secondary education. Unfortunately, not all college and university graduates can be employed in Willow so they must either work elsewhere or be relegated to menial positions.

The residents of Willow are fortunate in that they have access to a doctor, dentist, and optometrist in a neighboring health care centre. The health centre also houses a community health program and an ambulance dispatch station. Like the multiplex there is a constant flurry of activity at the health centre and you could easily spend a couple of hours visiting with people while you wait for an appointment. The health centre remains busy the five days of the week that it is open. They treat a variety of ailments and injuries but are also involved in preventative care.

Since the population growth rate of Willow is quite high community infrastructure is sorely lacking. Housing is cited as a major problem, when I spoke to the

housing department they indicated that they would need to build another 75 houses in order to meet the needs of the community. They stated that according to their statistics there were 9.3 persons per three bedroom house.

The importance of culture and language is evident everywhere in the community. In the various community gathering spots you could have conversations in Cree and English of a combination of both. Although much of the population under thirty years of age do not speak Cree there is constant pressure from younger children to learn to speak the language. As a result Cree is available to all students in the community school. The unique culture of Willow is evident especially at community gatherings. At feasts, wakes, and funerals, prayers and food are always offered and Elders are always honored.

Chapter IV

Presenting the Data and Data Analysis

Introduction

This chapter focuses on presenting the data that emerged from my attempt to identify factors that impact school achievement of First Nations students at Willow First Nations School. Through the perspectives of six selected First Nations secondary students I wanted to understand why they felt that they did not achieve as well as they could in school. With the themes of racism, peer pressure, alcohol and drugs, community and social control, and living conditions in front of me I began my attempt to analyze the data still, I struggled with the question "what are they (the participants) really saying?" I found that with the themes added up in their totality, they still did not seem to provide a complete picture of why students do not achieve as well as they feel they should, instead they as a whole provide valuable insight into factors that impact the success of First Nations students.

As I struggled with an appropriate way to present my data I become more and more concerned with insuring that the analysis spoke to what it really was that each participant was saying. I felt that perhaps providing "thick description" (Geetz 1973) would be most appropriate, since it is what I thought might provide some justice to the voice of the participants. Still I felt confined with that type of description because I felt it could not provide an accurate portrayal of the whole picture. I wanted to provide a picture of the participant as a member of a community rich with a unique set of values, beliefs, communication patterns and norms, things that could not be adequately

articulated even with chapters of description. I needed a method of analysis that would allow an holistic description of the participants. The context of community was of importance simply because that is how I define myself as a First Nation person. I know intrinsically that one cannot separate oneself from the context, nor would I even consider doing it.

Along with this knowledge was the importance of protecting the identity of the participants, I realized that "thick description" might violate this trust simply because reserve communities are closely linked thus readily identifiable by other First Nation people. I chose not to violate this trust. Since participants were sincere and honest with me I felt it essential to protect their anonymity to the best of my ability. I did not want to taint the trust and rapport I established; not only for their protection but also because I choose to live on a reserve and I feel a deep moral obligation to protect the integrity of our communities. Wilson and Wilson (1998) discuss this issue of "relational accountability" as the need to present data about our reserve communities in a context that is understandable to the academic community while still preserving the integrity of First Nation communities everywhere. To me the issue of relational accountability supersedes any academic requirements since I choose to continue to be a member of my community. Still I was faced with the fact that I had to present the data in a format worthy of 'western academic standards,' standards not necessarily my own but standards which I have agreed to. Therefore, I have reconciled my feelings by providing the themes in a manner that does not compromise anonymity yet attempts to present the findings in the context in which they were intended.

The Participants

The six participants were all residents and band members of Willow First Nations. To preserve each of their identities I have given each a pseudonym. Each of the participants attended at least two different schools and in Ken's case he "went to a different school every year since grade one." In each case the schools my informants attended were off reserve and catered primarily to non-Native students.

What follows is a brief composite vignette of the participants in this study. I have used school files, community knowledge, and cultural awareness in putting the composites together. All information is factual to First Nations communities although no information is factual to any given student in the study. The vignettes are provided simply as a means of contextualizing the data gleaned from the informants.

Lori

Lori is a tall, soft spoken and extremely polite 17 year old young lady. She spent a few years living with a foster family in the city when her father regained custody of her and her brother he brought them back to the reserve. Lori had spent grades two through nine at a small neighborhood school in a suburban part of the city. When she moved back to the reserve she attended public school in the nearby town. Still, she longed to be with the friends that she had from her old school in the city. Eventually, Lori and her father and his girlfriend began to have differences of opinions and when he felt that she was defying house rules he asked her to leave. She eventually dropped out of school during the second semester of grade 10 because she did not have a stable living environment. After Lori and her father reconciled she moved back home and began to

attend Willow. She is now very determined to finish school so that she can become a lawyer.

Elaine

After Easter break, Elaine did not bother to return to school and did not finish the last three months of grade nine. She has always done extremely well in school and has attended school both off and on the reserve. At 16 years old she is a very confident girl who willingly shares her strong opinions with others. Elaine is an only child who has grown up in a large extended family with grandparents and numerous cousins around. Her mother is a very strong and well educated woman who has always tried to expose Elaine to new experiences, especially because her work took her to a number of different locations as Elaine was growing up. When Elaine left school she was quite disappointed but knew that she would return on her own accord. Once Elaine returned to Willow she decided that she would work and train hard because she wants to attend university and play on the university volleyball team.

Doreen

Doreen is the mother of a beautiful 3 year old daughter. She demonstrates patience and maturity well beyond her nineteen years. She and her boyfriend currently live with another young family in a rented house in town. Doreen attends school full-time at Willow and works part-time in a video store. She is the youngest of five children, three boys and two girls. Most of her family lives on the reserve. Doreen has spent very little time away from the reserve but did attend provincial schools for a number of years. When she realized that she was pregnant she was devastated but

became even more devastated when she realized that her parents 25 year marriage was breaking up. She never questioned keeping the child but realized that her life would be changed.

Neil

Neil is a self assured 17 year old. He has a good sense of humor and enjoys having a good time with friends. Although, he wants to attend a two year college program, education is not a priority in his life, still he knows that he will finish school. Neil's parents separated when he was only six years old; he and his older brother have lived between both parent's homes. Both Neil and his older brother have attended reserve and provincial schools depending on which parent they were living with. In the last month of grade nine, Neil decided that school was getting quite boring so he decided to drop out for the rest of the year. When he left school his older brother, who was in university, was quite disappointed but his parents knew that he would return to school.

Greg

Greg is a quiet unassuming young man who just turned 20. He is currently enrolled in a four year university program and aspires to a career in business. Greg has a strong cultural upbringing because he has lived with his grandparents for many years. He continues to live with them and worries about who will take care of them when he goes off to university. Greg has four younger siblings who live with his parents a few miles down the road. When his parents were first married they lived with Greg's grandparents until he was eight years old. At that time there were two other children and when Greg's parents built a house, he did not want to move away from his

grandparent's home so his parents allowed him to live there. He attended the provincial school with his other siblings until grade nine, then he attended Willow School. He encountered some personal problems in grade 10 then decided to leave school for a brief period and continued working at home. Greg insists that he did not drop out of school, he merely left school for a period of time.

Ken

Ken graduated from highschool a couple of years ago. He and his twin brother still live at their mother's home. Ken's parents have been divorced since he was a child and they are both college and university educated. Although both his parents are members of Willow they have lived in a couple of different places for the sake of employment and Ken often moved between each parent's home. As a result he attended many different schools and seemed to enjoy the change that each new school year brought. Most of his life Ken was a top student but his grades seemed to deteriorate when he was in junior high. By grade 11 he became increasingly bored because he felt the curriculum was irrelevant and course delivery was not stimulating enough.

Themes and Realities

Now that I have given the context from which my informants speak, it may be easier to follow their contributions as I progress through the themes of the study. As I listened to my informants a number of themes emerged. Ideally, all themes would be discussed as a whole, unfortunately the limitations of the presentation format can not permit the holistic format I desire. Therefore, for logistical purposes the themes will be discussed in two distinct categories; school factors and community factors.

School Factors

School factors are those which are directly related to school, according to the students' perspectives, even though most extend well beyond the realm of school. Those factors are racism, belonging, peer pressure, drugs and alcohol, dropout, community and social control, and poverty and living conditions.

Racism

Racism is an issue that is a reality that First Nations people face. Children experience racism at a young age and often do not become acutely aware of it until it is blatant. Once children realize what it is they develop a heightened awareness and sensitivity toward it. Children learn to cope and deal with racism in their own way and eventually develop attitudes and mechanisms for dealing with it. In the interviews the issue of racism presented itself almost immediately because I asked students to provide me a background of their educational experiences. Students shared the fact that they had attended other schools along with that emerged their memories of racism from elementary grades.

Both Lori and Greg began their educational experiences in off reserve schools. Like many parents on the reserve, their parents wanted them to experience school in an off reserve setting so that they might get a well rounded education. Lori recalls that her early school memories were not positive because she felt different and left out. She stated that:

> ever since I was a kid there was a lot of racism in school, really bad especially from other kids being called things...because I was different...at first it really brought me down, mostly from grade one to five, I was

> kinda ashamed of myself when I was younger.....they didn't want to play with me in grade two, but I had my own friends and then in grade three I was starting to get friends.

When Lori began to attend a small city school in grade two she immediately felt the racism because children refused to play with her. Once Lori had learned what she needed to do to survive in the system she was able to make friends. Once she became part of the group she felt comfortable and "after awhile it was just kinda like family....my classmates they were like family we would go to school together everyday, through the years always in the same class we just knew each other real good ." By the time Lori was in junior high she felt comfortable with her peers.

Greg's recollection of his formative school years were very similar. He stated that he went to school off the reserve:

> when I was small up to grade nine, (small town), it was kinda tough facing racism, race was a major factor there....past grade two, three, I never felt race in grade one, grade two was alright....then grade three that was when, there was a few students from Willow that went to school there and they would always get put down big time

Unlike Lori there were other Native children attending (small town) elementary schools so those were the students that Greg became friends with. The problems not only were of a verbal nature but sometimes escalated to violence on the playground. Most of the time it was the older non-Native students against younger Indian children. Since the Native students were in grade three they:

> would just have to take it. We couldn't stand up for ourselves...in grade five we were solid cause we were the biggest kids there, then in grade six we had to go to (small town) junior high and it would start all over again...

He felt that once they had managed to survive elementary school they then had to face the same issue of being the "smallest man on the totem pole" again on junior high. In junior high he became less willing to get involved in the battle between the two groups and instead took a more complacent position. "They didn't say much to me because I think I was turning white." When I asked him what he meant by turning white he said it was because "I went to school there for so long you wanna feel your part of the group but it doesn't work out." The need and desire to be part of a group was important to Greg as it was to all participants. This will be discussed later.

Alternately, Doreen and Ken began their elementary education on the reserve but eventually moved to off reserve schools and in Ken's case his parent relocated. Initially, neither of them were completely aware of what racism was. When they began to feel racism in the upper elementary grades Doreen stated that "in class there was an Indian side and then there was a white side, I remember that in grade five." Doreen was not completely cognizant of it until she began to learn more. She said she learned it through:

> what was being taught in school, because you learn about racism but it never really occurs to you till you see it and I think I seen that in four, five, and six. I think that's when you see it most....and after that it really doesn't matter in junior high because...you don't care you're in junior high, you have that bad ass attitude anyway and it doesn't matter to you. But it's in four, five, and six that you really notice

Doreen indicated that racism became an issue because it became a topic in the school curriculum. Then she realized that it was happening to her. She was initially bothered by it but eventually chose to accept and develop an attitude to cope with it.

Ken also learned about racism in upper elementary school. When I asked him

how and when he found out what racism was he stated:

> it was early, cause I came from here and it was, like in my very younger years I came from Willow and everyone was okay and everyone was Native and then I went out there and then people seemed to notice like they knew that I was Native. Some of them didn't know but they found out. I had one incident where I went to my friend's place....and his mom didn't like me. She sent me home early then he told me a couple of days later that he couldn't play with me anymore.

After Ken's family relocated to a larger urban centre he quickly found out that racism was everywhere. Unlike with Lori, there were other Indian children at that school and those soon became his friends.

> In (small city) there were quite a few schools that were like that, a lot of kids that were really racist but then there were quite a few Natives that went there and that was my circle of friends down there... all the Blackfoot kids.....there was just some white kids and only at like two schools we went to throughout the whole year, it was totally racist. There were only a few white kids that would come hang around with us and they seemed to like the poorer kids...

Ken also found that the only 'white' children that would play with the Native children were the poor ones. The poor children were also those children who were considered outsiders by other white children. Although Ken's early experiences with non-Native people were quite negative he did not harbor any negative feelings and went to each new school with both an open mind and an awareness of what could occur. He felt that students did not know any better because they were taught those attitudes at home.

This awareness became apparent throughout this study. I was then able to draw from my own experiences and realized just how important this awareness of racism had become to me. I realize just how very different this awareness is from that of the experience and awareness of white mainstream kids.

Doreen also found that "some white kids did play and some were just like 'yeah right'...the white boys they were meaner than the white girls". She found that the boys were more blatant at expressing racism. Like Ken, Doreen felt that the racist attitudes of children were the fault of parents because that is what they "were taught at home and that's all they know."

Neil often moved between each parent's home and would attend off reserve schools most of the time. In speaking of his school experiences he talks about his experience with racism in a large town junior high school.

> Our LA (language arts) teacher in (large town) in grade nine split the class between whites and Indians. Browns on this side and whites on this side....that's how our class was but I always skipped it, I didn't like it, she was real mean and whatever.....prejudiced...

Neil also stated that the seating pattern was deliberate. By the time he was in junior high he was quite familiar with racism. Although he tolerated 'white' students all his friends were Indian. He stated that the interaction between the groups of students was limited to some talking "but we stuck with our own color." His attitude toward racism by this time was one of acceptance because he had his own group of friends so he "didn't care." Still, he was driven to the point of violence and was involved in a several fights with 'white' students. Neil recalled one particular fight with another student in [large town]:

> Because they're racist, I had to fight because if I didn't he would just always keep bothering and calling me down, so I had to fight....he'd say "tell me some Indian jokes" or "what do you guys eat?"....for about two weeks, he would just keep bugging me...

When Neil felt he could no longer endure the other student's taunts he felt forced to fight. Careful not to jeopardize his school status he and the student fought off campus.

As a result he and the other student managed to stay clear of each other for the remainder of the year.

When Ken was in junior high he moved back to Willow and attended school in [small town]. When he arrived there he was immediately thrust into a highly tense racial situation:

> When I got there I was with all these Native kids and these white kids didn't like us, it was like that and I didn't see why, I couldn't see why. Like I grew up with white kids going to school with them and it didn't bother me to mingle with them or whatever...

The tense situation eventually became violent and school authorities had to react. An assembly was called to bring the two groups together and once each group had an opportunity to present their side of the situation and "it was really high tension for about a month, but then it cooled down and towards the end of the year it was nothing." Although the situation was quite negative Ken felt that it was not the fault of students to display such attitudes. Instead he blamed parents because "their parents talk down about Natives." Even when Ken encountered racism when he moved to another town in high school he managed to maintain a positive attitude. Although he could not break into any of the existing student cliques:

> I had a vehicle everyday there, but it was hard to get in with them no matter what I did, I had the money, I had everything there and I had the cool clothes and cool music and everything and I wasn't like a cool kid there.....I think it was partly because I was Native, I think, because there was only one other Native kid there but he was with them and he wouldn't even talk to me

In spite of the fact that Ken was unable to make friends at his new high school, he was not quick to blame racism as the primary factor. His attitude toward non-Indian people

still remained one of tolerance. Although he was somewhat disappointed with the attitude of the only other Native student in the school he understood that it was the way that student had learned to survive in that environment.

Although the students initially felt hurt by the racist actions of other students and teachers they harbored no hateful attitudes. Instead they felt that it was a direct result of parental attitudes and beliefs and no fault of the students themselves. Each of the students learned to accept racism as a fact of their off reserve school experience.

In my own off-reserve school experience, beginning in grade three, I remember children often being quite vicious and often engaging in games at the expense of Indian children. One particular game was known as; "Indian germs." It was a game of tag which began with a white student touching an Indian kid then playing tag with those germs for the entire recess. Of course Indian children were not included in the game. Although it was hurtful at the time we learned to cope by playing in other parts of the playground or school. Gradually learning how to cope became the means of survival and like Ken, sometimes some of the poor white children would play with us, since they too were outcasts. Like the participants in this study I grew to accept racism as a fact of life.

The participants shared their experiences of racism with the intent that it needed to be acknowledged as part of their educational experience. Their experiences with racism although somewhat harsh at times were accepted and understood. More important it displays the participant's resilience to recover and excel even in the face of an often traumatic reality. As is evident here, racism is a negative experience but it is a peril of mainstream education that becomes evident when its values are incongruous with

your own. Racism is not the fault of a single person but the result of years and years of misunderstanding. Furthermore, racism is institutionalized to the extent that it is taught in school curricula. It is formulated into teaching practices and perpetuated in the practical structure and formation of the entire governing structure of the country.

Belonging

Peer pressure in an inevitable reality of an adolescent's life. When each of the participants shared their experiences with peer pressure they discussed it as though it was an essential part of their experiences. Most significant was the need to belong to a group. For each of the participants, returning to school at Willow provided them with a feeling of comfort and acceptance. Doreen relates what it was like by the time she was in grade eight she "couldn't take it anymore....when I came back to Willow I could be myself I didn't have to pretend." Her experiences with racism were further exacerbated by a tumultuous home life and gradually became too much to bear causing her to become depressed:

> I was feeling depressed....at times I wouldn't even wanna go to class, partially because of my home life and partially because I was just tired of being somebody I wasn't. I was tired of acting like I didn't like Willow and I was tired of sucking up to those people just so I could be somebody there...grade eight when I came here (Willow) and things started to look up for me because I was with my own peer group. It was my own people and everybody knows me, I felt like I belonged again

As Doreen got older she felt she could no longer reconcile her need to belong by rejecting her own community. Group identity was of significant importance so she felt she had little choice and would have to "agree with them because no one likes to be a loner." When Doreen returned to Willow this played a critical role in her self

identification. She willingly followed the group behavior because she found the comfort and acceptance she had longed for. When she returned to Willow she immediately felt the comfort and embraced being at school in her own community. Doreen stated:

> It's a sense of belonging, like "I belong here, this is where I should be"....that's what drew me back here, I wanted to be myself and this is where I could be myself, I didn't have to pretend to be somebody else or try impress somebody else just to be part of the group, because I am part of the group.

She wondered why she had not returned earlier, "my sense of belonging just came natural." Above all, the negative feelings she had endured soon dissipated.

Although Lori did not attend Willow First Nation school till she was in high school she too felt the same sense of belonging. Lori had already left home and was wrought with feelings of hopelessness and rejection. She stated that "I thought of myself as no hope...because I didn't have a family and I had nowhere else to turn." In describing some of the differences she found at Willow after attending the small city school she states:

> There's so much, first of all there's no racism here, which is cool. No discrimination, second of all everyone is the same culturally...classes are smaller, here you get more attention...they're caring and they care how you're doing in school

Much like Doreen, Lori appreciated the fact she no longer had to deal with racism and when she began to attend Willow in high school she was especially appreciative of the individual attention and small class sizes. These two features seemed to be the significant elements that she desired and needed.

In echoing the need to belong Ken said that:

> It was important to be part of the group, cause I wanted to belong to something somewhere, like they were a tight circle of friends and I needed it...I couldn't imagine being without them at that time...without having that circle of friends, I probably would have been lost

Ken returned to Willow in high school. He felt that returning created a sense of comfort. His need and desire to identify himself with a tight circle of friends was important. Ken stated that he would have been lost without them especially at that time in his life because he had gone without such a group of friends for many years.

Although Lori did not attend Willow school in junior high, she still felt the importance of group identification at the small city school. She recalls the relationship that she shared with her class at the private school quite fondly. Stating that:

> We were a really close class. All the teachers knew we were a close class especially because we were in the small city school we were always kinda different than everyone else...we were always the different crowd and we all hung out with each other.

Since the small city school that Lori attended was in larger city there was ample opportunity to interact with students from other public schools, but this did not occur. Instead both groups chose not to interact and public school students often shunned the small city school students. Still the need Lori to identify with someone was evident.

Being 'In the Groove': Peer Pressure

Although group identity was important to all the participants in the classroom situation it could be a detriment. Greg talked about the importance of everyone in the class to achieve at about the same level. If someone got too high Greg said "they would start bugging him, not calling him a nerd but, putting it in their own way and making it sound funny. And all the boys would start laughing. Then maybe, they'll wanna slow

down." Similarly, if someone did poorly they would "still bug him, you have to average out." Therefore, it would be important for the teacher to realize this aspect of group achievement. When I asked Greg if he thought this was a bad thing he felt that it was just natural. Thus a teacher would have to insure that achievement levels are similar. When I asked him if a teacher should highlight the achievement of an individual he disagreed. He said it would have "to be the group."

Almost all respondents talked about the importance of being 'cool' and having cool friends to be with. Both Doreen and Ken provided what they felt were definitions of cool when they were in junior high. Although being cool was no longer of importance to them they provided good definitions. Doreen defined the cool people in junior high as "people who smoke, people who basically had that bad attitude, you wouldn't think someone who just stays in class and does their work was cool." On the other hand Ken stated that:

> It's hard to describe being cool. It's changed I think since I was at that age...now I'm not worried about cool...it doesn't matter to me now but at the time, you know, I thought there's the cool kids and the unknown kids

The 'unknown kids' would often be the quiet kids who stayed to themselves. Although they may not have been considered cool they were still accepted as being part of the community and were not ridiculed by their peers. Instead it was accepted that there were different types of people in the community and the classroom had the same type of representation in it.

Neil, who still felt it was important to be cool, said it was those people who can

"feel the groove." When I asked what he meant he explained "like how does it feel with everybody around, how they're dressing, how they talk...that's feeling the groove, scoping the scene." Meaning that it was people who were able to assess a situation and then fit in. Neil was also quite preoccupied with girls and he felt that it was important for a girl to be cool. When I asked what advice he would give a girl who wanted to be cool he stated that he would tell her to watch "rap videos...learn the way they dress, read magazines....change her slang." Neil's definition of cool is also further defined as someone who is popular. It is evident that participants had definite ideas about what a cool junior high person might be.

As Ken reunited with friends from elementary school he naturally fell into the cool crowd. He said:

> My friends were really outgoing, they were sure of themselves, not worrying about what anyone else thinks....we were the older crowd already by that time and everyone just wanted to be like us with our little group there...and that was the cool kids

Since his peers were other students he attended elementary school where he immediately was absorbed into the group; the older group whom everyone else looked up to.

Elaine immediately entered the 'cool' circles because she had a cousin in high school, a junior high student who hung out with friends from high school was considered cool. Elaine grew to be quite popular and her circle of friends continued to expand. When I asked her how one might get into the cool groups she said:

> Being either a relative...mine were from weekends I always used to go out and party with everybody and that's how I brought in new friends and that's how I started knowing people and then I'd come back to school and we'd just start talking

She felt a strong sense of group identification "if you don't have support of friends there for you then why do you want to be in school." Peers were of paramount importance to Elaine. Although she was quite popular she continued to make new friends and talk with all students. Elaine felt that the cool people in junior high were those who smoke, skipped school and wore designer clothing. She did say that there were those without designer clothing who were still cool.

By the time most participants entered high school they agreed that being cool was no longer as important as it was in the past. Doreen no longer cared about being cool since she was a parent trying to complete high school. Elaine still felt friends were important but she was more concerned with doing well in school. Greg further clarified the change in attitude from junior to senior high "when you're older your on your own. You don't depend on your friends...cause you'll be going to university somewhere else" Ken who had long since completed highschool and was in college stated "I'm not worried about being cool...it doesn't matter to me now." A few years earlier when he had returned to Willow, peer pressure had led him to skipping classes, drinking, smoking, and using marijuana.

Although being a member of a group is of critical importance to each of the interviewees, the underlying factor seemed to be the welcoming embrace they felt in returning to a school in which they felt comfort. The comforting embrace that they felt sometimes led them to engage in the activities of their group and this often involved skipping, smoking, drinking, and doing drugs.

Drugs

Among First Nation children smoking cigarettes is commonplace since many adults smoke. Tobacco is used as an offering and it is considered sacred. Although its use is meant for ceremonial purpose many abuse this sacrament for common us. As result cigarette smoking is prevalent and readily available to adolescents at any ceremony or gathering they might attend. Often when one attends a function they may be offered a cigarette as a sign of respect. Given the strength of group conformity one might feel compelled to smoke the cigarette. And because there is an increasing breakdown in how cultural norms are transmitted cigarette smoking can be seen as acceptable outside of ceremonial use.

For each of the participants the return to Willow meant that they returned to comfortable surroundings since they no longer felt that they had to keep their guards up. And most felt that they must succumb to peer pressure once they returned. Peer pressure often came in the form of participating in group activity and sometimes this involved the use of drugs. Drug usage was confined to smoking marijuana. Most of the participants were very candid in their descriptions of drug use. They were also very honest in discussing when they began to use drugs and how they felt when under the influence of drugs. This section is designed to provide insight into the perspectives of drug usage by the participants and to demonstrate the impact they feel that it had on their achievement.

Lori was first introduced to drugs when she was in junior high. She said:

It happened in the city first, grade eight...it was the stupidest thing I could

> have done, stupid.... like I had all these friends and they all did it too and I just thought, "why not?" and I liked it

After leaving home Lori's life spiraled into a period of smoking, drug use, and alcohol consumption. She felt extremely bad for getting involved in drugs but began to do drugs simply because her friends did. In recalling this period of time Lori said that "it screws up every chance of hope...you do that either because you wanna be cool or get away from things that were happening in your life." Lori's sense of hopelessness was evident. Drugs provided her with an escape from her daily reality. She stated that:

> It makes you forget about what's really there and what scared me was having to know what reality was...you're with you're friends, you're talking and doing things and your in this whole different world and you don't care when your like that...things that come to you that are bad, you don't care

The need to escape reality and forget about daily life was an essential for Lori to cope.

Greg was also introduced to drugs through friends he trusted in junior high. In one of his classes a close friend and relative asked him what he was planning on doing for lunch and invited him along. Once they left the school property he asked him if he wanted to try some and he said:

> I thought I might as well cause he's kinda like my brother, so we went there and I took a hit and after that people started giving me some more and that's how I started...I didn't buy it at first then I started needing it then I had to buy it that's when they wanted me to spark up with them, to share...peer pressure.

Since Greg was brand new to Willow, he felt the pressure of conformity and followed the advice of his close friend. When I asked him if the pressure to smoke drugs was common he replied "yeah ...like the senior high kid has one he'll give that kid a blast and

say "go ahead try it, it's cool, " force them....not force them but basically it is." Greg felt that in this situation the younger student would have little choice but to succumb to the pressure of trying. He stated that older students might also encourage younger students to try drugs when they do not have enough money. He said some might not "have enough money to supply his own need and then he'll tell his friends "why don't you just check it out, go buy one maybe you'll like it." The pressure to participate in drug activity is evident and younger students seemingly fall prey to the pressure.

Elaine did not engage in the use of marijuana although most of her friends did. She did not smoke drugs because after trying it once it left her with side effects for a number of days. She choose not to try it again even though the drug was readily available to her. Since Elaine was quite popular and hung out with an older crowd of students she did not feel the pressure and her friends respected her decision. When I asked her why she thought others did drugs she said it was because "they have a lot problems. Maybe to hide problems, maybe it's just they want to be cool and fit in with all the other people." Her ideas of why students try drugs demonstrated the need to belong and the fact that some students like Lori desire escape from the reality of everyday life.

Neil was first introduced to marijuana at a young age but he was not sure what it was. Then when he was about fourteen he began to use it. He felt that it was a way of fitting in with a peer group. He felt that it was a way of making friends, "either through drugs or through cigarettes."

Ken's introduction to marijuana occurred when he was fourteen. He said "I think

fourteen was the first time I got high, but it wasn't till later on, till seventeen or eighteen that I started getting heavily into drugs." Ken's involvement in drugs lasted only a year or two, still he feels it was long enough to distract him from school. He said that:

> after leaving I would have a hard time coming back, but if I stayed here the whole day then I wouldn't have a problem with it. But if I left the school to go for lunch at the multiplex and even that would distract me and I would be off, I would get easily distracted...if I smoked drugs at lunch then I wouldn't want to come back.

The effects of marijuana use were well articulated by both Neil and Greg. Neil stated that when you are high "you feel more uptight and nervous, I don't know. It depends on your mood...then you have a headache. Burnout it's called. That's when you get the munchies." He explained that the headache did not always happen but the munchies, the desire to eat, was inevitable. On the other hand Greg stated that:

> When you're high you just mellow out...it's a chilling drug, but when you drink it just makes you pumped to do anything, you feel like your kind of the world or something, then that's when you see the people walking solid all the time...alcohol can make you pumped to commit suicide. It will also make you pumped to do some other stuff, like steal a car, drugs won't do that to a person...weed anyways

Greg's drug of choice was marijuana simply because he felt that it allowed him to be more in control. He felt that people under the influence of alcohol were not in control therefore might do things that they might not otherwise do if they were straight. Greg stated that people walk around 'solid' meaning that they felt invincible and were willing to fight anyone. He provided the example of suicide because he felt that young people might be driven to that point if they were under the influence of alcohol. Greg also stated that the effects of smoking marijuana lasts about an hour then you burn out and

"you wanna sleep or munch out...the munchies."

Greg then went on to state that the desire to sleep after one 'burns out' can be a detriment to achieving well in school because "they would want to leave class or just walk around trying to keep themselves awake." The problem of feeling lazy was also echoed by Lori. She said "it made me lazy to go to school. It made me lazy to do my homework. It made me lazy to this and that. I didn't care anymore eventually." On the other hand Neil stated that he could perform better in class when he was high but he would be adversely affected once he reached the point of burn out. At that point he stated that he would want to leave class.

Invariably each student felt that drugs became a detriment to overall learning because they caused one to be distracted either when they were high or when the drug was wearing off. Each of the participants felt that the availability of drugs also made it easier to abuse. Although drugs were more difficult to get at school, according to Greg and Ken one only had to walk across the street at lunchtime "to score," (buy drugs).

Alcohol

Like drugs, alcohol use for the participants was a direct result of peer pressure. Unlike drugs, alcohol use among participants was confined to weekends. Participants were adamant that alcohol was used only on weekends and in controlled quantities as Greg stated "just enough to get buzzed." The use of alcohol was also confined to highschool students, junior high students were dissuaded from drinking because they were considered too young. Still, those who consumed it were in highschool and still under the legal drinking age.

Elaine's drug of choice was alcohol since marijuana left her with bad side effects. She stated "I never did do drugs, for me the first time I tried it I just couldn't handle it, I would blackout and come to. It was like that for two days on a joint." After her first experience with drugs, Elaine was quite alarmed by her reaction and decided that she would not do it again. Although her friends smoked marijuana they seemed to respect the fact that she chose not to. Instead Elaine drank, she began to consume alcohol in grade nine because she hung out with an older crowd. When I asked her how it was that she was able to drink with older students she stated that "they would just come and pick me up...and I got to cruise around with them." Cruising around with older students meant that there would be drugs and alcohol available. Still 'partying,' as Elaine referred to it was confined to weekends. On the other hand Neil stated that he indeed drank alcohol on occasion but stated that he would "rather smoke weed."

Doreen, Greg, and Ken stated that they began to drink alcohol in highschool. Doreen said that in grade ten "it was kinda like initiation, it was kinda like 'you're in highschool now, you get to drink now,' it was kinda like the go ahead." This clearly showed the general feeling that alcohol consumption was confined to highschool students. Although most highschool students are under the legal drinking age students found ways to acquire the alcohol. When I asked Ken if alcohol was easy for underage students to get, he said:

> Yeah, cause the crowds, or your circle of friends are varied. Usually you have a couple of older people and a couple of younger people. The age group varies. It's never all the same age unless, I guess there's different groups but when your partying you always try to have an older person with you so you can get alcohol

Much like marijuana, drinking alcohol is done with the peer group. Often the group could be mixed with various ages, but people remained with their circle of friends.

One particularly interesting aspect that participants stressed was the need to conform to the established norms of alcohol consumption. When I asked the participants if drinking took place all the time they were quick to point out that drinking during the week was taboo although it happened occasionally. It was usually confined to weekend parties. It was also pointed out by some of the participants that excessive alcohol consumption was not socially acceptable. When I asked Greg if alcohol was consumed all the time he was quick to say, "Oh, no. Maybe the odd weekday but on weekends usually." Doreen echoed the same point and further elaborated by saying:

> No, only on weekends, kinda like weekend warriors...not so much during the week. You were considered kinda weird if you came to school half snapped...it's okay to go out on Fridays or Saturdays, but if you're going out constantly, people will say "oh he's just an alcoholic, he's just a drunk"....a drunk is drinking all the time, it's okay to drink on the weekend but if you're constantly carrying on through the week that's considered a drunk or alcoholic.

Not only were the lines of when it was acceptable to drink clearly drawn, the amount that it was acceptable to consume was also established because those who drank excessively were labeled alcoholic by their peers. Doreen stated that:

> During the weekends is the time to party and during the week you go to school, but if you drink more than just the weekend you're labeled a drunk....because it's kinda like a bum if you're a drunk, you're a bum and nobody wants to hang around with a bum.

The evidence that group behavior dictates acceptable standards is clear. Doreen's recognition of acceptable alcohol consumption within the peer group demonstrates both

her desire to be part of the group and her keen sense of group expectations. Expectations of behavior are often established through teasing. Greg stated that if someone drinks too much "you would just get bugged....wino, hound dog, 'where's all your clubhouse,' it's what wino's drink." Within the peer group gentle teasing is the most effective means of establishing behavior because it is what most First Nations children are accustomed to. Confrontation is not acceptable especially in small communities where everyone knows everyone else.

When I asked Greg and Ken if they thought that drinking was detrimental to school they both agreed that there was some impact. Greg stated that:

> You go to school, it's either you wake up to go to school and you're just hung over or else you stay home and miss school. And if you came to school you'd still have the alcohol scent in your mouth and it would give you a bad reputation with students and teachers.

Greg felt that drinking would be a detriment either way since one would miss school and if he did not miss school he would run the risk of losing the respect of students and teachers. Again the significance of group compliance in determining one's behavior is evident. Ken also stated that "I really didn't bother with drinking that much, but when I did the night before then I wouldn't come to school the next day."

Although the use of alcohol was clearly dictated its impact on school did not appear to be as evident as with marijuana because drinking took place primarily on weekends. Those who chose to drink during the week faced teasing from friends and often chose to stay home if they did indeed drink during the week. Perhaps the fact that alcoholism has been the scourge of First Nations communities in Canada might

contribute to the strict norms that have been established by the participant's peer groups. Participants like Doreen often related excessive drinking with alcoholism and alcoholism with being a bum and "nobody wants to hang around with a bum."

When I asked the participants if they regretted succumbing to peer pressure each one stated they had no regrets. Ken said, "I don't regret it at all...it's a part of life, it's part of growing up. Your friends are a part of your growing up." The importance of being part of group seems to supersede all other factors. Still others felt that is was a necessary learning experience, Lori stated that she had no regrets and that "it made me realize what was out there...I know never to go back to that stage and I know what to do not to get there again." She felt her experiences with drugs and alcohol made her a stronger and more aware person.

Dropping Out

Dropping out of or leaving school has been a problem among First Nations students for many years. Although more First Nations students are remaining in school many leave before highschool graduation. (Frideres 1998). All of the participants with the exception of Greg, dropped out of school. Greg experienced some personal problems and left school for a brief period of time then returned to another school awhile later. He did not consider this dropping out. Participants dropped out of school for various reasons ranging from pregnancy to sheer boredom. Still each participant had a strong desire to return to school with the goal of completing highschool and continuing on with post secondary education.

Lori dropped out of school in grade ten. After leaving her home she spent time

at the homes of friends and relatives living out of her backpack. This was her first year in public school and the adjustment from small city school coupled with her living conditions and lifestyle eventually became too complicated and led her to dropping out. Lori did not drop out immediately, but after few months of living at different homes, drinking, and doing drugs she felt that she should leave school:

> After awhile I'd get up in the morning and I'd have to go to school and I'd be too lazy to get up to go to school and then I'd say "the hell with it I'm gonna stay home today" and I kept doing that...doing that...doing that, then everything just dropped.

Eventually, Lori's high school grades began to deteriorate along with her inconsistent attendance and she felt that everything was getting worse so she dropped out. Even more devastating was the fact she had begun to alienate herself from the close friends she had from the small city school, "I lost all of my old friends because they didn't do drugs." After Lori left school she said she had "low self-esteem," and nothing really mattered anymore.

Elaine felt that boredom and the fact that her house was within a ten minute walk to the school contributed to her dropping out from school in grade nine. Although she "did well in school" she felt that "school was kinda boring....I didn't find it fun anymore." As Elaine became increasingly bored with school she started to skip school more and more often. "I think because I lived so close... it was so close that I could just skip." Elaine dropped out in the second semester of grade ten. She felt that students dropped out of school because of long holidays, "because people get use to staying up late and sleeping in." Elaine said that "after spring break last year I dropped out because

I didn't want to be up early in the morning."

Toward the end of grade ten Doreen found out that she was pregnant. Coupled with the breakup of her family, she felt that she had little choice but to leave school. She says that:

> Towards the end of grade ten I found out that I was pregnant. That's where it kinda dropped, like I didn't wanna learn anymore. I felt like "I'm pregnant and I don't have to"....you know when they say "you're young and stupid," that's how I felt and I thought, "why did I get pregnant?"

The issue of keeping the child was never a question but she felt that her pregnancy forced her to leave school. She did not have the drive or desire to learn and decided not to complete the school year. When I asked her why she felt people dropped out of school she said "if they're not getting pregnant then it's cause of the drugs and alcohol."

Neil, like Elaine left school because of boredom. Although he was having a good school year in grade nine, he left school in May, only a month before completing the year. Since it was near the end of the year he decided to move in with his other parent for the remainder of the summer. His father worked so he had a lot of free time to spend at home and visiting friends. He said "I just wanted to smoke weed and see my chicks." He was of the attitude that youth was for fun and he told me "having fun is free you can't save it so you gotta spend it."

Although, Greg did not drop out from school he left briefly and returned to another school. He did not elaborate on his reasons. He simply said, "I really screwed up in grade 10." Then he paused for a few moments and said, "I don't wanna talk about it." Since he chose not to talk about the situation I did not pry any further. I realized

that whatever it was, had had a significant impact on his school year.

Ken, like Elaine and Neil, became increasingly bored with school but his boredom was more acutely articulated. He was living at his mother's home and she had a good job. His boredom in school was rooted in his belief that the curriculum had little to do with the practicality of everyday life. Ken stated he felt bored;

> Cause I didn't feel like I was learning anything and the things that I was learning they weren't important. I would always ask teachers "When is this gonna come into use in life? Why do we have to know this?" and they'd say "Because you need it to pass school" and no one ever told me unless it was in math or science, when it would come into play. In English 10...every year I would ask...like "poetry, why do we have to learn it?" and they would say "it's part of the curriculum."

Ken's obvious boredom was coupled with the fact that he felt there was little significance of that knowledge in his life and as a result he eventually dropped out. In spite of his boredom he returned to school and completed his English 30 course with a 78%, "I always seem to get that mark," almost 80%.

Given that each of the students left school for a variety of reasons each returned to school with the aspirations of attending college or university. Some also stated that they did not want to be dependent on welfare and government handouts. Lori wants to wants to attend university to become a lawyer. Neil wants to become a power engineer. Greg is enrolled in university and plans on become a successful entrepreneur. Elaine wants to play on the university volleyball team and become a physical education teacher. She said "I just want to finish school, I don't wanna be on welfare and go pick up my cheque once a month at the welfare office." Ken also stated that school was important to him and is currently in a two year college program. He stated:

> I didn't wanna be a bum...I see a lot of people around here they quit school and they're still around here. They're older guys like thirty year olds that didn't finish school and they haven't left the reserve and they're still here and they probably won't ever leave the reserve.

He wants to live in what he calls the 'real world' then return to the reserve to retire. Ken's feels that his desire to work and live off the reserve can only be achieved if he completes post secondary training. Alternately Doreen's return to school is driven by her perceived need "to provide for my child and I know I want a good job and if I want a good job I have to finish school." After completing highschool she plans on attending college to become an accountant.

At the onset of my study I found that it was somewhat difficult to locate males who had left school and returned. Females were much easier to locate. When I posed this question to the respondents most stated that they did not know why this disparity existed. Ken felt that it might have something to do with ego and failure. He said:

> It's hard to go back, because you've said to yourself "I don't wanna go to school. I've quit school now, I'm gonna try do something else and go out on my own." When you go back to school it's kinda like saying "I've failed like I can't do it on my own, I need to go back to school and get this." It's kinda hard to go back and get back into school once you're out of school.

Returning to school after one has left, according to Ken, is an admittance of failure to utilize the resources one left school with. So when an individual is forced to return to school he must swallow his pride and admit that he has erred.

Dropping out of school for the participants was not a direct result of a lack of achievement. Instead it was the outcome of a variety of situational differences. For the respondents in this study it also marked a turning point in their attitude towards their

own achievement. For some of the participants it was an inevitable occurrence in a tumultuous life. For others it was necessary for them to have time to rethink their values toward education.

Community Factors

Anything that occurs in a First Nation community, including all the themes already discussed, can be considered community factors. Since reserves are small and everyone knows everyone else, the sense of community is felt at all levels; in school, in the work place, and in the community at large. Therefore the term community will be used in this section as a term inclusive of all these relationships.

Community and Social Control

The concept of social control is one that is unique to small communities, it establishes the rules of conduct and behavior. In the reserve community setting where the participants lived, social control is a method of promoting normative group behavior. Participants felt that expected behaviors are most often cultivated through gentle teasing and sometimes even sarcasm. From a young age, especially among many Cree parents in Willow, teasing is the method utilized to show children how they should behave. Since children are socialized in this context from a young age they learn to become aware of it. Participants also stated that they learned behavior through observation and participation.

The role of the family in the participants education was an aspect I wanted to know about. As in most First Nations communities the family does not only include parents it includes extended family, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. This was true for

the participants in this study. Elaine felt that her ideas about education were developed by her mother's example. When she dropped out of school she felt she had to return to avoid having a similar struggle in the future. She said:

> My mom, she didn't finish highschool and when I was growing up that's what she had to do was finish highschool. And it was hard on her and it was hard for her to finish her child care diploma...I didn't want my kids, and me going to school and them going to school, maybe for university or something but not highschool.

Although, Elaine's mother eventually completed highschool and post secondary training she felt that it was a struggle and did not want that for her own children. She also stated that her mother provides her with support and encouragement to complete highschool. Elaine felt that the role of the family is to have a positive "attitude toward school, they need support, somebody pushing them, like you have to go to school." She felt that families need to promote schooling and push children to go to school. She thought that some parents were not supportive enough of their children because they left their children unattended when they "went to bingo." Elaine also perceives the encouragement of her extended family as important in completing highschool. She said "after my grandma passed away, I said 'I wanna finish school for her' because that's what she always wanted me to do, to go to school and graduate."

When Lori dropped out of school and began using drugs and alcohol, she knew that she had disappointed her family. She said that "they were really, really, surprised I did that. I was the least expected to do that out of my family. They expected really high of me and I did all those things." Lori was keenly aware of the fact that her family expected her to remain the high achiever that she had always been. She also knew that

they were surprised, not because they told her directly, but because she had always played that role in her family.

Ken felt that his departure from school was a disappointment given that most of his family members were well educated. He said that they played a major role in his return to school:

> One of the main factors is mainly my family because I see like my aunties and uncles, they're all doing something...a lot of them are educated and they're all doing good and I don't wanna be the black sheep of the family. Like the only guy living off welfare for all their life, when they saw me drop out and I was hanging around the house doing nothing, everyone was always encouraging me to go back to school.

By seeing the examples in his family, Ken felt the need to finish school in order to conform to the expectations of his family. Like Elaine he felt the encouragement and support of his family was essential in completion of formal education. Ken also felt that his father valued a good education because he wanted him to attend a better highschool even though Ken would have preferred to attend the one his friends attended. He sent Ken to that school because "they did a report on the news about that school and that it wasn't as high (academically) as the other school. So my dad put me into that school but I kinda wanted to go to the other school."

The expectations and the role of the community were expressed by each of the participants. Each felt that they had a role to play in the community and that the role was as essential and as important as everyone else's. Doreen articulated these points well by saying:

> I think my role as a young person is to do well in school because I know I'm the next generation and I know if I want a good job in Willow, I have

> to finish school. If all of us could finish highschool that would be so much better for the community. I think when I grow older I will be the type that makes a difference in the community and that's what I wanna do, I wanna support anyone going to school because I think education is really important. School is my door to opportunity. If I can't finish school then the door closes on me, I get cut off. But if I finish school the door is open to me.

It is clear that Doreen accepts and recognizes her role as a young person who will impact the community in the future. She also demonstrates her embrace of the community because she feels that if everyone completed highschool it would be to the advantage of the entire community. Doreen's analogy of the door clearly demonstrates her value that education is of utmost importance.

Neil did not personalize his response but stated his point more generally by saying that the community expects young people to "go to school, stay out of trouble." He also added that the expectation of Elders is to "keep the language...don't forget the old ways." Greg added that he felt his role in the community was "to show students, 'don't give up' just try to do your best at what you can do...what you're good at and one day you will achieve it." He felt that since he had left school he could provide positive encouragement and role modeling to those who were feeling defeated. Greg also felt that role modeling could have negative and positive consequences because:

> When you're small you watch everything that you see and eventually you wanna be how those people are. It's just like drugs, you see someone smoking it....I know some kids do that, they see a kid smoking cigarettes, kids maybe wanna be like that and smoke. Role model right there, a bad role model.

Ken felt that role models provided a positive example to the community. As an example he stated "at the graduation last year they had everyone with their master's and

doctorates to come out...they are encouraging education in a wise way. They are really pushing education." Ken felt that this was a positive example for the students because it was recognizing the achievement of a group of people from the community.

In light of the importance of community roles I asked Doreen what role the community could play in improving student achievement. She said that there should be "more extra curricular activities in the evening." She provided an example, "When the gym was opened that was pretty good because you have all kinds of ages there and it was something for the kids to do. It kept kids out of trouble. It kept them busy." Elaine further stated that she did not see "too many students going there high [on drugs or alcohol] because no one wants to be seen standing around like a dummy." Again the issue of social control in the community was reinforced.

Learning by example and observation seemed to be a salient feature for all the participants. Each knew the expected behavior at community functions and were quick to provide examples of such behavior. Most discussed the unwritten yet expected protocol of attending wakes and funerals. Ken said that as a child he would attend wakes with his grandmother. As he got older he became aware of protocol "by going there and watching what she does." He said:

> When you start getting older you see people and they go and they pay their respects and greet the family and then they go and sit down, and then communicate and talk with other people...it's kind of a gathering there. That's how it's expected everyone does it.

Ken demonstrates his knowledge of the expected rules of behavior, behavior that he has learned through observation and behavior that he would not dare to deviate from since it

would be disrespectful.

When I asked Doreen where she learned rules of conduct in the community she said:

> I think it just came natural when I came back to Willow. I don't know where you learn it I guess your peers, cause that's where I learned it from....it just comes natural. I think the Elders too, like how I learned how to behave was through my grandmother and I respected that. I think that's why it stuck to me. I think that it would be good to have an Elder in school.

Doreen's belief that rules of conduct came naturally is indicative of the inherent nature of social control. It also adds further justification to the fact that since these rules are so deeply ingrained one would not even consider doing otherwise.

The role of the community is evident in the responses of participants. More importantly it demonstrates the power of social control if one desires to remain or become a respected member of the community. As was stated by Greg, it can be utilized in both a positive and negative way. Then Elaine stated some students might not have the support of family and therefore must rely on the role of the community in providing that support. Therefore, it becomes even more necessary for the school system to provide support that can not be found elsewhere by students.

Poverty and Living Conditions

Issues of poverty, living conditions and lifestyle became a theme largely as a result of my own observations. Although some of the participants alluded to these factors as somewhat of a detriment to achievement, only Lori discussed these factors as contributing to her lack of achievement and eventual departure from school. In my

observations of the community I found conditions typical of many First Nations. Although not everyone in the community lives in extreme poverty there still are far too many who do. I found that there was an extreme shortage of housing and as a result overcrowding in homes. This meant that a student living in an overcrowded home would not have the space or conditions to study or do homework. There was also high unemployment, especially in the winter. Seasonal employment opportunities were available to men in either firefighting or construction. As a result there were a high number of people existing on seasonal welfare. The meager amount of income derived from welfare led to a feast and famine existence. When welfare checks arrived people would have money to get basic needs and have some entertainment. Unfortunately, entertainment for many involved gambling such as playing video lottery and bingo. Although these observations are somewhat harsh they are a reality in many First Nation communities in Alberta.

In a document that was produced for the community by a consultant, youth were asked what they felt were key community concerns. After completing a questionnaire the top five problems they felt were of greatest concern were, alcohol, suicidal feelings, marijuana, teen pregnancy and too much bingo playing. Although, I am not sure how the data was collected or interpreted I still feel that it provided validation to my observations.

When Lori left her home she relied on the kindness of relatives and family to provide her with her basic needs. She said her self-esteem suffered, "it was really bad, after I had no place to stay and after doing that everyday, everything kept getting worse

and because of it my self esteem dropped." When I asked where she got money from she said "Aunties, uncles, friends...and even with my smoking habit I even started bumming off anyone, I didn't care." By the time Lori reached the point of asking people she did not know for cigarettes she felt that she had sunk to a point where nothing mattered. "Sometimes I'd cry cause I had nowhere to stay and I'd just try to find a place to stay." Lori felt she had little hope and contemplated suicide several times. In spite of this situation she felt that she "was better of than other people" who did not have friends and relatives.

Doreen cited the lifestyle of families as a detriment to school. She felt that "their lifestyle, they're not motivated or pushed to go to school...like when your supposed to wake your kids to go to school." She stated that she did not want to be judgmental but felt that some people did not provide their children with the guidance they needed. Doreen felt that there were a lot of families in this state. When I asked her if the school should change programming to meet the needs of the families she described she said "No, it should stay the same, there's nothing you or I could do, it's just parenting...we would all like to go into homes and change that, but we can't...but it does have to start from the homes." Doreen felt that it was important to help people and she felt that good parenting was essential. Likewise, Ken stated school programming should not change for those who find it difficult to be there. He said:

> There are a lot of people the majority who go through school with no problems, without dropping out...maybe not the majority, but a lot of people can go through without having any troubles at all but then the ones who do have troubles, there are all different circumstances, you can't have one program that will help everyone out...it's all different

factors.

Ken's statement echoes the need for individuals to become more responsible for themselves rather than expecting programs to change for them.

Student Perspectives on Achievement

The basic premise of this study was to identify the factors that students felt impacted their achievement. With this premise in mind I attempted to glean a student definition of achievement. Elaine defined achievement as "reaching goals, succeeding." Doreen said "it means getting along with everybody, being there, trying to be on time, and homework." Neil felt it was "passing and going to school just about everyday." Greg felt that depended on "what skill you're good at...achieving what you do best." To Ken achievement "means what I'm planning to do and achieving it, getting what I plan, like my career goal or my education. Accomplishing all that will be my achievement." With these definitions in mind I realized that participants felt that achievement had little to do with getting high grades. Instead achievement meant being in school and doing your personal best.

When I asked some of the participants how they felt achievement could be improved they provided some valuable insights. Ken felt that "school needs to be more interactive rather than the teacher standing in front...activities that we could do in study groups...it needs to be more interactive with students, like having conversations." Although the suggestion is seemingly simple it reinforces the need to focus on group learning and peer supported learning. Doreen felt that student achievement could be improved by further utilizing the group concept by focusing on "high school because

they are the ones setting an example and junior high will listen to the senior high...they look up to them." Doreen feels that the role modeling of senior high students will create the most positive change in achievement. Greg also echoed the need for students to hear this message from students near their own age. Elaine felt that students so often hear the message about staying in school and not doing drugs from older people, that it no longer means anything. She said, "we used to get the lecture about drugs and alcohol every week...once a week and maybe kids are just turning it around, kids are just pushing it away, they hear it too much. I was getting sick of it."

Initially I assumed that it was a lack of achievement that caused them to leave school. Instead, I found that the idea of achievement was not a concern of most students before they left school and that it was the other factors in their lives that caused them to leave.

Without realizing it, racism provided the background for all future education experiences. Participants felt that racism had created a void in their lives. Arriving wounded at Willow First Nations School, they became comfortable and quickly fell into various forms of peer pressure. The peer group became a priority and academic achievement quickly fell to the wayside since it could not match the fulfilment of the void left by racism. Peer pressure led many of the students to become involved with smoking, drinking and drug use but the ultimate goal was to belong, to feel a sense of security in being in a place that accepted them. As students of Willow school students felt a greater sense of belonging in the community. Though keenly aware of community norms and expectations they still left school. Therefore, it is essential to examine the

findings discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter V

The Final Analysis: Conclusions and Recommendations

When I began the research process I was determined to find out why my students were not doing as well academically as they could in school. I assumed that students left school due to a lack of achievement and I determined to find a remedy to the problem of underachievement. I was sure that if I identified the factors adversely impacting achievement the solution could be easily found. I realized that my initial assumption was far from the truth since none of the participants cited lack of achievement as a factor causing them to leave school. Instead I found that these factors were part of a larger scheme. A scheme of systemic racism that began and has continued to evolve since the arrival of Europeans.

The European settlers in this country known as Canada brought with them a set of values and beliefs to civilize iyniwuk[5] (the people). The people were seen as "passive recipients in need of knowledge, training, and direction from a more advanced civilization" (Pauls, 1996 p.27). The beliefs and values manifested themselves in institutions designed to perpetuate and facilitate a Eurocentric world view. Schools were the primary source of perpetuating these ideals because they "reflect the power and the educational needs of the colonizers" (Kelly and Altbach, 1978 p.2). Residential schools became the chosen vehicle to indoctrinate children. Unfortunately the legacy of residential schools has been a sad one. The children of that era "emerged unsure of who

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[5] Iyniwuk - A Cree word meaning "the people." Every Indigenous language group has a word which refers to they, themselves, as being "We the People."

they were - Indian by race, Christian reform school by training, and often utterly incapable of fitting into either world" (Pauls, 1996 p.31). The fact that these values and beliefs were incongruous with the beliefs of iyniwuk created outcomes that are evident today. Problems of alcohol and drug abuse are the most evident manifestations of the clash of cultures. Still it is not my intent to enter into a tirade about the European. It is however my intent to provide a frame of reference for my findings. Therefore my findings will be discussed as pieces of the larger puzzle of colonialism and ultimately colonization.

Once the pieces of the puzzle that students presented have been discussed, I will make recommendations to foster change. In order to facilitate change and impact student achievement I must recognize that as a First Nations person I must first identify the continuing impact of colonialism. In recognizing its impact I can begin to educate Aboriginal youth so that they can begin to shed the shackles of neo-colonialism.

Summary of the Findings

Throughout the course of meetings and interviews with the participants a number of themes that supported the current literature on underachievement emerged. Although it was not my intent to reiterate the conclusions of other researchers I feel that it is important to acknowledge the findings within those contexts.

The most salient theme that emerged was the issue of racism. Each participant indicated that racism was a formative part of their early educational experiences in off-reserve provincial schools. Initially they did not experience racism but by the time they reached grade three or four they became acutely aware of it. Once they became aware of

the unwritten rules of relationships between Indian and white children they created friendships with Indian children or anyone else who would befriend them. As young children they learned to reconcile their feelings of hurt in order to cope and function in the public school environment.

By the time the participants reached junior high school they no longer cared about establishing friendships with white children. As students became more independent in junior high they were also less willing to accept racial slurs from white students. Among the males this meant that they might get into fights with white children in order to maintain honor. Although respondents cited racism as being a factor leading to violence, they bore no long term resentment to those who practiced it. Instead they felt that the racist attitudes of white children were inherited from their parents therefore no fault of the children.

The fact that racism was acknowledged by all students as an issue in their educational experience leads me to conclude that it is indeed a detriment to achievement. This notion is acknowledged and expanded upon by Paul's (1996) article in Racism in Canadian Schools. There are different types of racism each with its own definition; "redneck racism represents a deliberate and conscious effort to deny or exclude; polite racism is more subtle and indirect; institutional racism consists of socially sanctioned put-downs; and systemic racism entails consequences that are inadvertent, but exclusionary and real"(Fleras, 1996 p.71). Ogbu (1993) also cited race as a factor impacting the achievement of involuntary minorities. Although his studies have merit they are not necessary applicable in predicting the future aspirations of First Nations students. As a

matter of fact findings in this study disprove Ogbu's claim that members of involuntary minorities do not do well in school because they feel that they would be relegated to menial positions in society therefore chose not to aspire to higher goals. Instead participants in my study had high aspirations for their own educational future.

Some of the participants returned to Willow when they were in junior high and others returned in high school. Each of the participants found Willow to be very different from the provincial schools they had attended yet they could not clearly articulate what the differences were. What they did indicate was the immediate sense of belonging that they felt. They enjoyed the warmth and embrace of being in a culturally homogenous environment. This speaks very clearly to an answer: a pathway to success comes through culturally congruent and responsive education.

As they reconnected with old friends and relatives at Willow they willingly and immediately fell into group patterns of conformity and identification. Dabul, Bernal, and Knight (1995) called this desire to be part of a social group allocentric self identification. Unfortunately this desire was sometimes a detriment to the academic achievement of students in the study however all of them were able to see a clear path out of the dilemma. Although the participants acknowledged that peer pressure activities impacted their achievement they did not regret ever engaging in them. Instead they felt that it was of paramount importance to be part of the social group at that stage of their development. They were actually able to relate what might have appeared to be negative behavioral patterns (drug and alcohol use for instance) as necessary trial and error stages through which they had to progress in order to experience for themselves a better way of

coping.

The issue of alcohol use was interesting in that participants had clearly defined views about who should consume alcohol, when it should be consumed, and how much should be consumed. They stated that alcohol consumption was confined to high school students and it was almost like a rite of passage into highschool. Participants also agreed that consumption should only take place on weekends and on weekdays in rare or exceptional cases. They also felt that one should not drink excessive amounts of alcohol because he might risk gaining the reputation of an alcoholic. The fact that participants had such clearly defined ideas about alcohol led me to conclude that these ideas were well defined because we have a history of alcohol abuse. Although they may or may not abuse alcohol they wanted to make it very clear that they were not alcoholics and that they did not have a problem with alcohol.

I was amazed that students were able to analyze the experience of drinking, in such a mature manner. Seldom are young Aboriginal people exposed to positive moderate social drinking. Instead they are exposed to the medical Alcoholics Anonymous model where the individual identifies as an alcoholic. And like all designated labels, once branded with the title of alcoholic the individual might live up to the label with the accompanying behavior. The young people in the study believed that there was a time and a place, and a skill in drinking appropriately.

The issue of social control was an interesting aspect of the study. Simply because social control and the transmission of cultural norms is well understood by each of the participants. Although they are unsure how they learned the unwritten rules of

conduct within the community they are aware of them. They also acknowledge the importance of the transmission of these values to younger children.

The findings of this study although not comprehensive do provide some elements of the larger picture. I have come to realize that these are micro-elements of a macro-structure. I have also learned that students are extremely resilent. The macro structure is one that we have inherited and it is one that has continued to evolve since the arrival of Europeans. Even though residential schools were designed to eradicate and destroy the culture of First Nations it failed to do so. But substantial damage to First Nations did occur. As Indian people began to take matters into their own hands they demanded greater control of their own affairs. Yet in managing our own affairs we inadvertently strive to replicate the systems we fought so hard to eliminate. For example many of our band schools have become Indian operated provincial systems. In essence we have become our own colonizers. The era of neo-colonialism is merely classical colonialism veiled as self determination; we have become our own oppressors in this new era. Therefore it is our responsibility to become cognizant of our actions so that we can get onto the right road leading to self determination.

What the Future Holds

During the research process I learned a great deal about the community, myself, and the resilience of First Nations students. I also realize that there are certain recommendations that have emerged from this study. The first recommendation is that students must be taught that they have inherited a macro-structure that has certain expectations. And that by dropping out, becoming pregnant, and abusing substances

they are in fact engaging in a self fulfilling prophecy. The second major recommendation is that teachers of First Nations children should have compulsory training that will help them to understand the perspective of First Nations peoples. This training should not be merely a band-aid solution to a monumental problem. Instead it should be comprehensive and community specific. Finally communities must validate and utilize the knowledge that resides within the people young and old. By teaching the people in our communities the importance of honoring their inherent knowledge we can utilize it to carry us forward.. "As we move into the next millennium, we should not be tolerant of the neocolonialism that runs unchecked through our knowledge-generating systems. We must ensure that the disemination of thought through journals, media, and other avenues have 'gatekeepers' who understand the effects of colonialism and are committed to fighting any perceived act of hegemony on our communities" (Duran and Duran, 1995 p.7).

It would also be of benefit for future researchers in First Nations to step out of the confines of current research methods and utilize other mediums. Since I feel that most research presentation methods restrict the degree of expression I feel that pictures, video and audio tapes could supplement written text and allow some of the dimensions of First Nation perspectives to be more clearly emulated. These mediums would begin to allow what Hall (1989) referred to as the high context culture to be shared more clearly. The gestures, posturing, and tone of voice used by participants could be better understood in the context in which they were intended. Of course this would mean that the researcher would have to possess an emic perspective in order to provide a true

analysis. More importantly certain ethical considerations would have to be considered.

As I return to the classroom, I am now armed with new tools; tools to teach about racism, about colonization and about cultural transmission. It is not by chance that schools are structured as they are - instead the structure is a clear manifestation of how mainstream culture perpetuates itself. I want to teach about this so that my students can make choices. And above all I want to provide an example. I am a happy and proud Indigenous woman who will continue to teach in my home community. I love its security, the collective wisdom and knowledge of all those who share my community space. For we all have our own answers and I have found that *nista maka annis nisohkastwan* (I too am resilient).

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